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> Standing aloof in giant ignorance,
> Of thee I hear and of the Cyclades,
> As one who sits ashore and longs perchance
> To visit dolphin-coral in deep seas.
> So thou wast blind;—but then the veil was rent,
> For Jove uncurtain’d heaven to let thee live,
> And Neptune made for thee a spumy tent,
> And Pan made sing for thee his forest-hive;
> Aye on the shores of darkness there is light,
> And precipices show untrodden green,
> There is a budding morrow in midnight,
> There is a triple sight in blindness keen;
> Such seeing hadst thou, as it once befel
> To Dian, Queen of Earth, and Heaven, and Hell.[1]

The necessity of materiality in the imaginative sphere was contended throughout the eighteenth century. This is evident, for example, in Edmund Burke’s mid-century preface to *A Vindication of Natural Society* in which he argues that real world practicality and materiality must be paramount within imaginative discourse; when considering “out of the Sphere of our ordinary Ideas” we must be “sensible of our Blindness”, otherwise “we can never walk sure”.[2] Furthermore, “this we must do, or we do nothing”, stressing that “we must seek in a profound

[1] ‘To Homer’ 1-14
[2] Burke xi-xii

subject, not only for arguments, but for new materials of argument".[3] This concern over the "materials" needed when considering a "profound subject" is echoed over half a century later in Keats's pronouncement that poetic imagination must be created "From something of material sublime".[4] Keats is also preoccupied in this poem with the notion of being "sensible of…blindness"; he contends "that imagination brought, / Beyond its proper bound" is "Lost in a sort of purgatory blind".[5] So, how does a poet avoid purgatorial blindness? In order to discover how, Keats turns to Homer; a poet who has what Keats terms, "a triple sight in blindness keen".[6] How does Homeric insight, his "sight in blindness", accord with Keats's conception of the "material sublime", given the apparent incompatibility between blindness and the using of sight in the material world in poetic description?

The sonnet, 'To Homer', gathers into splendid unity much of Keats that otherwise remains scattered through the great odes, *Hyperion*, and the other poems of his 1820 volume. The poem is, in Thomas Cook's words in *Studies in Romanticism*, "a consummation of his highest and latest thoughts upon poetry and poets, and upon poetism, if you will, as a way of seeing reality".[7] Cook's emphasis on "seeing" reality, a common enough expression in English parlance, is a trope that Keats questions, particularly in 'To Homer'. The opening line, "Standing aloof in giant ignorance", is no mere ignorance; it is a deliberate choice, as is connoted in the sense that this state is "aloof". Confidence and humility are reconciled, but the reconciliation is achieved by absorbing "ignorance" into "giant". Echoes of Keats's concern about the relationship between knowledge and ignorance sound in another poem composed in 1818: *Hyperion*. Apollo plaintively wails:

> Where is power?
> Whose hand, whose essence, what divinity

[3] Ibid xi-xii
[4] 'Epistle to J.H. Reynolds' 69
[5] Ibid 78-79, 80
[6] 'To Homer' 12
[7] Cook 9

> Makes this alarum in the elements,
> While I here idle listen on the shores
> In fearless yet in aching ignorance?
> Oh tell me, lonely Goddess, by thy harp.
> That waileth every morn and eventide.
> Tell me why thus I rave, about these groves!
> Mute thou remainest—mute! yet I can read
> A wondrous lesson in thy silent face:
> Knowledge enormous makes a God of me.[8]

For Keats's Homer, as for Apollo with his "half-shut suffused eyes", it is in part blindness that allows for "Knowledge enormous" to "Pour into the wide hollows of...[his]...brain".[9] All of life, "Creations and destroyings", pour into Apollo in the very moment that he is removed from human life and becomes "immortal":[10]

> Creations and destroyings, all at once
> Pour into the wide hollows of my brain,
> And deify me, as if some blithe wine
> Or bright elixir peerless I had drunk,
> And so become immortal.[11]

The "wide hollows" of the brain echo the "giant ignorance" at the sonnet's opening. Moreover, it is the drinking in of life and knowledge whilst in a "peerless" or "blind" state than enables one to rise above humanity and become "immortal".[12] It is only once Apollo has the "Knowledge enormous" garnered from a "peerless"—with the pun on both sightlessness and uniqueness—drinking in of life and death, that he is able, conversely, to see more clearly, with "his enkindled eyes"; "enkindled" suggesting that the "Knowledge enormous" gained during his apotheosis means Apollo is both able to and is inspired to see anew.[13] It is "Knowledge enormous" that leads to true sight, therefore, rather than sight leading to knowledge. Similarly, for the "blind" Homer, "on the shores of

[8] *Hyperion*, III.103-113
[9] Ibid, III.44, 117
[10] Ibid, III.116, 120
[11] Ibid, III.116-120
[12] *Hyperion*, III.119; 'To Homer' 5
[13] Ibid, III.121

darkness there is light".[14] Edward Larrissy writes that his blindness "permits Homer to inhabit the fertile boundary between the ideal conception locked in the blind man's head, and the world of experience".[15] The "triple sight" that Keats considers Homer to have—"Such seeing hadst thou"—comes as a result of his partial deification and perceiving of poetical insight from Jove, Neptune, and Pan: he is like the mythological goddess "Dian", who sees into the earthly, the heavenly, and the hellish.[16] More than this, in the sonnet's closing line, Keats is suggesting that Homer viewed life as completely as did *Dian triformis*, the triple goddess who, as Luna, Diana, and Hecate, presided over Heaven, Earth, and Hell. Keats's choice of Dian is significant. Not only does she unite the realms of human life, death, and godly immortality, she is the twin sister of Apollo. Dian, like Apollo in *Hyperion*, sees into all "Creations and destroyings". In Keats's poetry, Apollo and Dian repeatedly feature in tandem; in *Hyperion*, for example, as "Apollo is once more the golden theme!" readers are reminded of "his twin-sister sleeping in their bower".[17] That Apollo and Dian dwell together is implicit in the description of "their bower".

Homer epitomises, for Keats, the "double immortality of the Poets", as Keats elucidates in a letter to George and Georgiana Keats of 2 January 1819.[18] In this letter he copies out a poem written "toward the end of 1818", the same year as 'To Homer', which explores similar concerns about the gulf between the Homeric poetic insight he yearns for and his own fears of never reaching such heights:[19]

> Bards of passion and of mirth,
> Ye have left your souls on earth!
> Ye have souls in heaven too,
> Double-lived in regions new! [20]

[14] 'To Homer' 9
[15] Larrissy 163
[16] 'To Homer' 13, 14
[17] *Hyperion* III.28, 32
[18] *Letters*, II.25
[19] Stillinger 621
[20] 'Bards of Passion and of Mirth' 37-40

That Homer is in Keats's mind as he writes this poem is clear in the poem's use of Dian. In the sonnet, Homer is described as embodying the "triple sight" of "uncurtain'd heaven", just as does the goddess "Queen of Earth, and Heaven, and Hell", in 'Bards of Passion and of Mirth' the doubly-immortal poet can with "heaven commune | With the spheres of sun and moon" whilst simultaneously "in soft ease | Seated on Elysian lawns | Brows'd by none but Dian's fawns".[21] The spectres of Dian and Apollo emerge almost from the sonnet's opening: the "Cyclades" are their birthplace.[22] The repeated intimations of Apollo and Dian run throughout the sonnet, particularly given Apollo's harnessing of light as god of the sun, and the image of Dian as a beacon of light amongst darkness as goddess of the moon. In the affirmation "Aye on the shores of darkness there is light", for example, this link is palpable. In the use of the affirmative "Aye" in this line, Keats is again playing on the idea of not needing conventionally to see in order to achieve insight; by using a word that sounds the same as "eye", Keats is consciously making the point that an "eye" is decidedly not needed to achieve or affirm insight.[23] Keats's use of deities associated with light emblematises the poem's overall theme of the relationship between blindness and insight; Keats rhymes ostensibly contrasting images in order to emphasise the importance of the interchange between the two: "There is a budding morrow in midnight", chimes with two lines earlier, which stresses that in "darkness there is light".[24]

It is now generally recognised that Keats's letters are self-conscious literary performances involving pondered self-representation (see for example John Barnard's "Keats's Letters: 'Remembrancing and Enchaining'"), and so provide invaluable insight into his understanding of poetry. 'To Homer' continually oscillates on a sort of ladder, from Keats through Homer to Apollo and Dian, and back again; from the mortal poetic aspirant, through the demi-deified prototype, to the immortal archetypes. In this image of a poetical apprentice working up the ranks, Keats's thinking harks back to his letter to

[21] 'To Homer' 12, 6, 14; 'Bards of Passion and of Mirth' 5-6, 10-12
[22] 'To Homer' 2
[23] Ibid, 9
[24] Ibid, 11, 9

Bailey of 22 November 1817, in which he considers a "favourite Speculation" of poetic "happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated".[25] The poetic repetitions in finer tones as one moves upwards to be nearer Homer and Apollo is both a delight and a torture. On the one hand, as Keats continues in the letter, in the moment of poetic ecstasy when you are "mounted on the Wings of Imagination so high" you imagine "that the Prototype must be here after".[26] You imagine that your poetic insight might be able to reach Homeric or even Apollonian heights. Even though this moment is "delicious" it is passing. Keats uses the phrase "What a time!", which does two things.[27] Firstly, the definite "a time" suggests that this phrase connotes feelings of a particular specified and contained moment of time, rather than an on-going passage of time. Secondly, the whole phrase, complete with emphasising exclamation mark, suggests it is a nostalgic look back upon a time which has now passed. It is disillusioning, then, after the ecstatic moment has passed, and when the poet realises that in that time rather than reaching Apollonian heights, s/he had merely looked into the "shadow" of her/his "own soul's daytime | In the dark void of night", as Keats writes to Reynolds in early 1818, and her/his "imagination [has been] brought | Beyond its proper bound".[28] It is, after all, "a flaw | In happiness to see beyond our bourn".[29] Again, the theme of sight is used by Keats to grapple with notions of insight, or lack of it. Even though Homer was a human and mortal poet who lived, and breathed, and died on Earth, Keats's descriptions of him place Homer further up the scale nearer to Apollo. Indeed, Homer although blind is deified by his insight into being able truly to see into Earth, Heaven, and Hell: Keats exclaims "such seeing hadst thou". Conversely, Keats on earth "saw | Too far into" and "saw too distinct into" "eternal fierce destruction", so much so that he is in fact blinded by these sights, "Lost in a sort of purgatory blind", and rather than

[25] *Letters* I.185
[26] Ibid, I.185
[27] Ibid, I.185
[28] 'Epistle to J.H. Reynolds' 70-71, 78-79
[29] Ibid, 82-83

being deified by this, Keats is made "sick" by it.[30] The moment of ecstasy that is brought about by the mere "forming to yourself" of images created in "the elevation of the Moment...mounted on the Wings of Imagination so high", contrast unfavourably with the pain created by the inevitability of the chasm between Homer's and Apollo's ability to see properly into poetic heaven and Keats's own realisation that he cannot properly see beyond the bourne of the earthly.[31] The "elevation of the Moment" of imagined but false insight contrasts with the sickness that "Still" remains within him at the painful realisation of his inability to see insightfully.[32] In the heat of the moment, Keats recognises that he will "form" to himself something "more beautiful tha[n] it was possible and yet with the elevation of the Moment you did not think so".[33] He is blinded into "forming" ideas that are not "possible"; rather than elevating what is truthful, these moments of elevation persuade him to believe the untrue. Burke warns against this when he writes that "There is a sort of Gloss upon ingenious Falsehoods, that dazzles the Imagination, but which neither belongs to, nor becomes the sober Aspect of Truth".[34] The imagination-dazzling poetic impulse is not Homer's insightful "triple sight in blindness keen", it is instead a blinding force that takes Keats further away from true insight. For Homer, on the other hand, seeing into heaven is not beyond his bourne; despite being physically "blind", "the veil was rent, | For Jove uncurtain'd heaven to let thee live".[35] Cook proposes that for Keats "Blindness becomes a symbol of the creative imagination", and thus in 'To Homer' "the rent veil is the veil of the irrelevances of *mere* sights and *mere* seeing".[36] More than this, the gods have allowed Homer to see "heaven" "uncurtain'd", and this has given him immortal poetic life: as Keats puts it, "heaven" has been "uncurtain'd" "to let" Homer "live".

[30] Ibid, 93-94, 96, 97, 80, 99
[31] *Letters* I.185
[32] 'Epistle to J.H. Reynolds' 99
[33] *Letters* I.185
[34] Burke ix
[35] 'To Homer' 5-6
[36] Cook 10

In the letter to Bailey of 22 November 1817 already discussed, Keats writes of the "complex Mind" and the "philosophic Mind"; a "Mind" for which it is "necessary" to temper the "most ethereal Musings on Earth" with an "increase in knowledge", "one that is imaginative and at the same time careful of its fruits".[37] This is the "staid philosophy" that Keats wants "to share" with Apollo which he hopes will "let" him "see" Apollo's "bowers" in the poem written just a couple of months after his letter to Bailey, 'God of the Meridian':

> God of the meridian!
> And of the east and west!
> To thee my soul is flown,
> And my body is earthward press'd:
> It is an awful mission,
> A terrible division,
> And leaves a gulf austere
> To be fill'd with worldly fear.
> Aye, when the soul is fled
> Too high above our head,
> Affrighted do we gaze
> After its airy maze—
> As doth a mother wild
> When her young infant child
> Is in an eagle's claws.
> And is not this the cause
> Of madness?—God of Song,
> Thou bearest me along
> Through sights I scarce can bear;
> O let me, let me share
> With the hot lyre and thee
> The staid philosophy.
> Temper my lonely hours
> And let me see thy bowers
> More unalarmed! * * * [38]

In the line "And let me see thy bowers", Keats is suggesting that it is a "staid philosophy" comprising both thought and experience that will let him "see" Apollo more insightfully. It is only a "staid philosophy" that can control the sick-

[37] *Letters* I.186
[38] 'God of the Meridian' 1-25

making "Moods of one's mind", as he calls them in his epistle to Reynolds.[39] Keats is aware that achieving true insight will not be painless, indeed the "God of Song" draws him "along | Through sights [he] scarce can bear", and yet still he begs "O let me, let me share" such insight "With…thee". When Keats considers the scarily "wide sea" it is a place he sees "Too far into", so that it evokes "an eternal fierce destruction" that removes him from happiness: "And so from happiness I far was gone".[40] At the same time, Keats recognises that such thoughts are "Moods of one's mind!". Although he is "sick" of "horrid moods" that he longs to shake off, he makes it clear that he is aware such "moods" are only temporary.[41] And more than being a passive recipient of vicissitating moods, he will proactively seek to change his mood: "I'll dance, | And from detested moods in new romance | Take refuge".[42] This refuge is found in considering Homer.

There is a great sense of longing in 'To Homer'. Keats effuses of Homer, and by implication Apollo, "Of thee I hear and of the Cyclades, | As one who sits ashore and longs perchance | To visit dolphin-coral in the deep seas".[43] This ties into the ninth line, with the re-emergence of "shore": Homer is one for whom "on the shores of darkness there is light".[44] Keats "longs" for such insight. Keats also uses imagery of the "shore" in portraying the deification of Apollo in *Hyperion*: Apollo announces, "I here idle listen on the shores | In fearless yet in aching ignorance".[45] The "shore", obviously, is a transitional space, located partially between two different "material[s]". In 'To Homer' the image of the "shore" is significant as it metaphorically symbolises the point at which he perceives his current poetic positioning; he is "on the shores of darkness" searching for "light". As the deities of light and the moon it is Apollo and Dian who guide those at sea, and Keats plays on the homophones "see" and "sea". In the 'Epistle to J. H. Reynolds' Keats sees "Too far into the sea", to a place "where every maw | The

[39] 'God of the Meridian' 22; 'Epistle to J.H. Reynolds' 106
[40] 'Epistle to J.H. Reynolds' 90, 94, 97, 98
[41] Ibid, 105
[42] Ibid,110-112
[43] 'To Homer' 2-4
[44] Ibid, 9
[45] *Hyperion* III.106-107

greater on the less feeds evermore"; seeing into the sea Keats sees an "eternal fierce destruction".[46] This "eternal fierce destruction" contrasts with the deification of Apollo, which comes at the very moment he is able to comprehend both "Creations and destroyings, all at once". In 'To Homer', however, Keats reflects that he would rather, as he imagines Homer does, perceive the sea not as a place to see eternal destruction, but instead "To visit dolphin-coral in deep seas". The word "visit" is interesting here, as it has multiple implications. He does not want to *see* the "deep seas", he wants "To visit": "To visit" suggests a sense of communion, a haunting sense of out-of-bodiness and so lack of empirical certainty, and at the same time acknowledges that experiencing such insight can only be transitory.

The last line of the first quatrain is significant for another reason. It alludes to two of Keats's favourite poets: Milton and Shakespeare. The image of the "dolphin" harks back to Milton's *Lycidas*, which laments the loss of a drowned friend at the moment of apotheosis: "Look homeward angel now…And, O ye dolphins, waft the hapless youth".[47] The comforting image of the sea-dwelling dolphins helping Lycidas to drift back to shore contrasts with the destructive sea itself:

> Ay me! Whilst thee the shores, and sounding seas
> Wash far away, where'er thy bones are hurled,
> Whether beyond the stormy Hebrides
> Where thou perhaps under the whelming tide
> Visit'st the bottom of the monstrous world [48]

In *Hyperion* Keats's Apollo is "on the shores" just before his apotheosis, and Milton describes "the shores, and sounding Seas" as taking Lycidas "beyond" and making him an "angel". Milton wonders whether his friend has "under the whelming tide | Visit'st the bottom of the monstrous world", and Keats echoes

[46] 'Epistle to J. H. Reynolds' 94-95, 97
[47] *Lycidas* 163-164
[48] Ibid,154-158

this Miltonic image in describing Homer's ability, as well as his own longing, "To visit dolphin-coral in deep seas". It is not clear in the opening quatrain whether Keats is definitely referring to either Homer or himself specifically, but this ambiguity is telling; it suggests that Keats is eager to align himself as much as possible with Homer. Moreover, in the "coral" image, Keats is harking back to Ariel's Song in *The Tempest*:

> Full fathom five thy father lies
> Of his bones are coral made:
> Those are pearls that were his eyes:
> Nothing of him that doth fade,
> But doth suffer a sea-change
> Into something rich and strange.
> Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:
> Ding-dong.
> Hark! now I hear them: Ding-dong, bell.[49]

By echoing this passage of Shakespeare's it is as if Keats is suggesting that the coral bones of his poetical fathers, Shakespeare, Milton, and Homer, are what he "longs" "To visit" in the "Full fathom five" "deep seas", rather than merely sitting in "ignorance" "ashore". Keats's desire to devour these three poets's writings is clear in Keats's letter to Reynolds, of 27 April 1818, "I long to feast upon old Homer as we have upon Shakespeare. and as I have lately upon Milton".[50] Shakespeare's words are also echoed in Keats's repetition of Ariel's diction, "Hark! now I hear them", when Keats writes of hearing Homer, "Of thee I hear". Rather than reading his poetry, Homer's words on the page are transmogrified in Keats's imagination so that he "hear[s]" Homer's voice. This might be related to the fact that he had to read Homer in translation, and therefore was at a greater remove in terms of the text than he might be if he could read Greek. It also harks back to Keats's early poem which explores "First Looking into Chapman's Homer", in which Keats exclaims "Yet did I never breathe its pure serene | Till I

[49] *The Tempest* I.ii.460-468
[50] *Letters* I.274

heard Chapman speak out loud and bold".[51] The focus on hearing Homer, rather than seeing him, also pre-figures the theme of blindness that emerges in the fifth line. Keats's preoccupation with sensory confusion is evident in the differing way that Keats describes the devouring of knowledge in 'To Homer' and *Hyperion*. Keats "hears" the written words of Homer, while Apollo reads silence rather than hears it: Apollo says to Mnemosyne, "yet I can read | A wondrous lesson in thy silent face".[52] There is also an interesting confusion of expected sensory interpretation in the notion that a "face" rather than a voice can be "silent".

Keats's conception of poetic insight, as channelled through his reverence for Homer, progresses from his earlier conception in 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer', written in October 1816, to 'To Homer' written two years subsequently. In the earlier poem, Keats expresses, almost boastfully, the abundance of poetic riches that he has "seen": "Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold, | And many goodly states and kingdoms seen".[53] This apparent boastfulness about the brilliance of the poetry he has thus far "seen", however, comes before he has encountered Homer. From this moment on in the poem Keats does not "see" again, although there is an abundance of imagery about sight. Keats describes himself 'Looking into' Homer, and then hearing "Chapman speak out loud and bold" which enables him to "breathe its pure serene".[54] It is at the moment of experiencing Homer that the sonnet's volte comes. In the sestet Keats uses on five consecutive lines imagery about sight without ever being able to "see": "felt I like some watcher", "into his ken", "with eagle eyes", "He star'd", "Look'd at each other".[55] It is as though Keats is suggesting that before he experienced Homer, he thought he had "seen" poetic riches, but now that he has breathed Homer in, he is aware of his lack of insight. In the later poem, the exuberance of discovering such poetic riches has been replaced by the longing to attain them himself; rather than be a distant "watcher" who "star'd at the Pacific",

[51] 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' 7-8
[52] *Hyperion*, III.111-112
[53] 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' 1-2
[54] Ibid, 8, 7
[55] Ibid, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13

he now "longs…To visit…deep seas".[56] In the sestet of 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' Keats also uses phrases that suggest a mixture of sea and see: the impression "swims into his ken" hints at this, and the suggestion is furthered in the image that "with eagle eyes | He star'd at the Pacific".[57] The commingling of sea and seeing evident in this poem that precedes 'To Homer' suggests that this was an issue which preoccupied Keats throughout his poetic contemplations. Using Shakespearean imagery may well have appealed to Keats as Ariel's song mixes the imagery of water and eyes: the sea has replaced "his eyes" with "pearls", thus the "eyes" he used to use for seeing are now blinded, but are something more valuable, "pearls", and that visiting "deep seas" means that the poet undergoes "a sea-change | Into something rich and strange". The word "strange" here is not a negatively-toned oddness, rather it suggests an intriguing unfathomableness, playing on the "fathom[s]" of the deep.

As well as touching upon poets of the past, in using "dolphin" imagery, there is a contemporaneous allusion to Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto 4, stanza 29:

> Fill'd with the face of heaven, which, from afar,
> Comes down upon the waters; all its hues,
> From the rich sunset to the rising star,
> Their magical variety diffuse:
> And now they change; a paler shadow strews
> Its mantle o'er the mountains; parting day
> Dies like the dolphin, whom each pang imbues
> With a new colour as it gasps away,
> The last still loveliest, till—'tis gone—and all is gray.[58]

In this stanza Byron uses the "dolphin" as poetic inspiration which "imbues…new colour" into the mind of the poet, and keeps increasingly inspiring the poet until the image has "gone": "The last still loveliest". In this way, like Apollo, the

[56] 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' 12; 'To Homer' 3-4
[57] Ibid, 10, 11-12
[58] *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* IV.253-261

"dolphin" will "Die into life" in the poet's imagination.[59] In this passage we might also see a sympathy with Keats's conception of the "material sublime". Byron's imagery here comes from something "material", something physical in the world that sparks an imaginative impulse, rather than trying to conjure an image up from the air of "shadow".[60] In Byron's words, that which is "Fill'd with the face of heaven" takes "all its hues | From the rich sunset". Keats echoes Byron's notion of "new colour" taken "From the rich sunset" when he exclaims of poetic inspiration:

> Would all their colours from the sunset take:
> From something of material sublime,
> Rather than shadow our own soul's daytime
> In the dark of night. For in the world
> We jostle [61]

The key notion here is that Keats thinks poetic colouring and imagination should "take" "From" "something" "material", as that reflects "the world" in which we dwell; poeticism is "colours touch'd into real life".[62] So although, therefore, to some extent the "deep seas" are unfathomable, on the other hand, in conceiving of these poetic depths in terms of imaginable particular "material" things, such as "dolphin-coral", Keats is better able to grapple with understanding how he conceives of poetic inspiration. In 'To Homer' Keats is working through overcoming his previous perplexity at "the wideness of the sea" that makes him "brood | Until ye start" as he "Feast[s]" "eyeballs vext and tir'd" "upon" the sea.[63] 'On the Sea' was written in April 1817. In 1817, Keats stands on "Desolate shores" enthralled but fearful of the "spell" of the "shadowy" deep.[64] In 'To Homer', however, the sea is no longer filled with his own "shadowy" conjurings, that are a mere "shadow [of his] own soul's daytime | In the dark of night",

[59] *Hyperion* III.130
[60] 'Epistle to J.H. Reynolds' 70
[61] Ibid, 68-72
[62] 'Epistle to J.H. Reynolds' 19
[63] 'On the Sea' 10, 13-14, 9-10
[64] 'On the Sea' 2,3 4

instead he conceives of it in terms of the "material sublime". That Byron also advocates the perception of sublimity having roots in that which is "material" is evident in the stanza but one before his "dolphin" imagery:

> The Moon is up, and yet it is not night—*
> Sunset divides the sky with her—a sea
> Of glory streams along the Alpine height
> Of blue Friuli's mountains; Heaven is free
> From clouds, but of all colours seems to be
> Melted to one vast Iris of the West,
> Where the Day joins the past Eternity;
> While, on the other hand, meek Dian's crest
> Floats through the azure air—an island of the blest! [65]

In Byron's own notes to this stanza he stresses the materiality of the scene, and makes it clear that the poetically imaginative descriptions have their roots in reality, that they were inspired by the sunset on a particular day and in a particular place: "The above description may seem fantastical or exaggerated to those who have never seen an Oriental or an Italian sky, yet it is but a literal and hardly sufficient delineation of an August evening (the eighteenth) as contemplated during many a ride along the banks of the Brenta near La Mira".[66] Both Byron and Keats use the image of "Dian" to explore the notion of poetic inspiration that is both "material," but simultaneously able to delve into the "Eternity" of all that be imagined "of Earth, and Heaven, and Hell". Larrissy argues that such musings consider "the characteristic Romantic paradox of the ideal in the real", but sublimity is less about what is "ideal" and more about earthly limitlessness.[67] As the poet-dreamer realises in *The Fall of Hyperion* when he is granted the power to see as Moneta sees, even the godly—those who can see the limitlessness of eternity—see into the depth of things in terms of the particularities of "size and

[65] *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* IV.235-243
[66] McGann 202
[67] Larrissy 157

shape": "To see as a God sees, and take the depth | Of things as nimbly as the outward eye | Can size and shape pervade".[68]

In the same letter to George and Georgiana Keats written at the turn of the year (between 16 December 1818 and 4 January 1819) in which he discusses the "double immortality of the Poets", Keats writes:

> sometimes I fancy an immense separation, and sometimes, as at present, a direct communication of spirit with you. That will be one of the grandeurs of immortality—there will be no space and consequently the only commerce between spirits will be their intelligence of each other—[...] I shall read a passage of Shakespeare every Sunday at ten o Clock—you read one at the same time and we shall be as near each other as blind bodies can be in the same room.[69]

Shahidha Bari comments when quoting the above passage that to be "as near each other as blind bodies can be in the same room" calls upon "a particular sensitivity and intimacy, and require[s] proximity and the availability of a shared spatial and temporal instant".[70] Thus Keats can conceive of a "direct communication of spirit" that is sensitive and intimate despite "immense separation". Keats imagines a "direct communication of spirit" that travels beyond the Atlantic Ocean, he can see beyond the sea so that his soul has insight into another's soul, yearning to be as "blind bodies" are, with their focus directed internally towards "their intelligence of each other"; the same feeling that he is yearning for with other poets in 'To Homer'. Bari argues persuasively that the notion of the brothers communicating via synchronised Shakespeare reading "works to the same effect as recognising a literary allusion" in that this absent presence enables "the purer" commerce of an intelligence of each other obtained without proximate bodies "neither blind nor unblind".[71] Bari takes this further, however, and argues that the above quotation shows that "Keats intimates an idea of presence effected despite distance, ideal insofar as it pertains beyond the real, material presences that are

[68] *The Fall of Hyperion* I.304-306
[69] *Letters* II.5
[70] Bari, 32
[71] Ibid, 33

sensed proximately by sight, touch, or sound". [72] And yet, this takes Keats's words in the letter out of their context. The ellipses in the above quotation means the following words are omitted:

> Now the reason why I do not feel at the present moment so far from you is that I rememb<er> your Ways and Manners and actions; I known you manner of thinking, you manner of feeling: I know what shape your joy or your sorrow w<ou>ld take, I know the manner of you walking, standing, sauntering, sitting down, laugh<ing>, punning, and every action so truly that you seem near to me. You will rember me in the same manner—and the more when I tell you that I shall read a passage of Shakespeare every Sunday at ten o Clock... [73]

It is significant that in this passage Keats does not 'see' his brother performing his mannerisms, rather George's physical traits mean that Keats "know[s]" him; the material manifestations in the real world have lead to knowledge. The sense that Keats feels "at present, a direct communication of spirit" with his brother is not, as Bari suggests, because this connection "pertains beyond the real, material presences that are sensed proximately by sight, touch, or sound", but precisely because of previous "real, material presences": "the reason why I do not feel at the present moment so far from you is that I rememb<er> your Ways and Manners and actions...every action so truly that you seem near to me". The sense of insightful presence and communication comes through a mixture of perceiving the material as well as the imaginative. This is encapsulated in Keats's expression of knowing "what shape your joy or your sorrow w<ou>ld take"; Keats imagines how his brother's joy or sorrow might be by imagining its "shape", "shape" suggesting a material manifestation. It is this idea, that knowledge comes through a mixture of materiality and imagination, which Keats is working through in his poetry into 1819. The figure of Apollo again resurfaces in 'To Homer' in the very word "dolphin". The word "dolphin" has etymological roots in "Delphinus" (*Oxford English Dictionary*), which is associated with the Oracle of Delphi at the

[72] Ibid, 33
[73] *Letters* II.5

Temple of Apollo on Mount Parnassus. By expressing that he wishes "To visit dolphin-coral", therefore, Keats is uniting insightful poets in a joint visiting, as each poet—Milton, Shakespeare, Homer, Byron, himself (he hopes)—is evoked as an Apollonian spirit as they visit his own mind as well as the mind of the reader.

In addition to the poem's fourth line being a hymn to other poets, it is also an attempt to demonstrate his own literary mastery. The rolling sound of the long and stressed "o" and "ee"/"ea" vowels just after the short, sharp consonant sounds of "d", "c", "d" in "dolphin-coral in deep seas", mirror the rolling sounds of crashing waves. The effect of this potentially being too harsh is mitigated by Keats using the soft, expansive sibilance of the double "s" sound in the final word "seas", meaning that the line leaves off with an easeful sense of limitlessness. This sense of limitlessness comes just before what might initially be imagined to be the limiting fact of being "blind", but rather than being an unpleasant shock, Keats eases the reader into accepting this state as empowering and in fact limitless as he continues the sibilance of "seas" in the connecting phrase, "So wast thou blind"; heightening this sense of connection by ending the previous line and starting the next one with the same letter, "s". Even though the hyphen after "blind" might suggest that the reader pauses here, the reader cannot dwell long on these four short monosyllables, as Keats swiftly moves the reader onto the next clause. The arresting "b" sound of "but" alliterates with "blind" to encourage the reader to move on along the line. Furthermore, the short sharp opening of the line is continued after the pause, in that the entire line is comprised of monosyllables. The first five, "So wast thou blind;—but", contain the hard consonant sounds of "t" and "b" along with short vowel sounds, whereas the second five, "then the veil was rent", alter from a sense of sharpness to one of greater ease by elongating the vowel sounds and by having the flowing, repetitions of the "e" sound in "then", "the", "veil", and "rent". By tying the "but" into the beginning of the sentence, and encouraging the reader to be pulled along into the next part of the line, Keats urges the reader to move quickly through the fact of Homer's blindness, and on to

how Homer is easefully able to rent the veil of curtained or limited perception despite his physical limitations.

The line "Aye on the shores of darkness there is light" evokes related passages in other poems; such as the 'Bright Star' sonnet, where "The moving waters at their priestlike task | Of pure ablution round earth's human shores".[74] Here water is purifying. It is interesting that Keats conceives of water engaging with "earth's human shores"; Keats commingles the notion of the human who "sits ashore" gazing longingly at the "deep seas" in 'To Homer' and the idea in 'Bright Star' of metaphorical water that washes over the "human shore" of internal longings. The struggle of dealing with being in the transitory space of the "shore" also re-echoes in "Saturn's voice":[75]

> starry Uranus with finger bright
> Sav'd from the shores of darkness, when the waves
> Low-ebb'd still hid it up in shallow gloom [76]

Similar imagery is also used in the close of 'When I have fears':

> on the shore
> Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
> Till love and fame to nothingness do sink. [77]

The imagery here, in this earlier poem written in January 1818, is more elegaic than the similar imagery in 'To Homer'. Here there is a sense of undesired loneliness and isolation that leads to the sinking of his thoughts, "on the shore | Of the wide world I stand alone, and…sink"; whereas in 'To Homer' there is a sense of deliberate and proud earthly solitude that paradoxically might better enable Keats to commune with his father poets in the depths of poetic unfathomability, "Standing aloof in giant ignorance…As one who sits ashore and longs…To visit…deep seas". Cook believes that "Water, and especially the sea, seems often

[74] 'Bright Star' 5-6
[75] *Hyperion* II.125
[76] Ibid, II.134-136
[77] 'When I have fears' 12-14

to be ominous for Keats; and in this sonnet, as elsewhere, it may connote a dark repository of incomprehensibles", but this is misguided.[78] In 'To Homer' particularly, water is not incomprehensible, it is the conduit through which Keats connects with his poetic forefathers and hopes to achieve greater insight; both in terms of poetic imagery using particular material things, but also literarily in the allusions to Milton, Shakespeare, Homer, and Byron that the fourth line envelops.

Furthermore, it is not only in the poem's content that Keats alludes to poetical inspiration. 'To Homer' is a significant mixture of genres. Not only is it a sonnet, with all the connotations of love poetry that the form suggests, it is also an ode: it is an ode 'To Homer', in the same vain as his 1819 great ode 'To Autumn'. As well as playing with genre, Keats is also playing with the conventions of the sonnet form, as the poem conforms to both Shakespearean and Petrarchan moulds. The form is ostensibly Shakespearean in that it has three quatrains each of ABAB rhyme followed by a heroic couplet that achieves final unity. Simultaneously, however, the opening octave presenting a potential struggle is resolved in the subsequent sestet, conforming to Petrarchan form. The sonnet, moreover, is also a form in which Milton excelled, and which many other contemporary authors were inspired by. Wordsworth, for example, remarks that from "the Sonnets of Milton…I took fire".[79] In playing with poetic form in such a way that both echoes and reworks his poetic forefathers, as well as eminent literary contemporaries, Keats aims to show his worthiness for being a legitimate heir of such inheritance.[80] Another reason that Keats may have chosen to use the sonnet form for 'To Homer' is the contemporary conception of the sonnet as a poetical form that encourages the author to assimilate the imaginative sphere with earthly material sublimity. In Coleridge's words in his 'Introduction to the Sonnets', "They create a sweet and indissoluble union between the intellectual and the material world".[81]

[78] Cook 12
[79] Wordsworth III.417
[80] For further discussion of the importance of poetic form in Romantic poetry see Curran, particularly pp.29-55 on the sonnet.
[81] Coleridge 72

In ‘To Homer’, then, Keats is working through concepts and forms that will occupy him during 1819, the year that many consider to be Keats’s poetic *annus mirabilis*; such as, the nature of poetic inspiration, the complexity of true insight, and his own ability to see and perceive properly. Moreover, it exemplifies Keats’s striving for Homeric insight, which he aims to achieve through material, earthly, sublimity. For the insight it gives us into Keats’s poetical conceptioning, as well as for its own poetic brilliance, ‘To Homer’ should be considered amongst Keats’s greatest sonnets.

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First Response

This article is skilfully alert to Keats's ability to distil into one single poetic instance the major preoccupations of his better known poetry and aesthetic principles. Keats's preoccupation with a Homeric 'triple sight in blindness keen' offers an insight to how Keats's conceived of the 'material sublime' as a means to ground his poetic imaginings and embellishments within our contingent and limiting world of experience. By focusing on the formal and affective properties of Keats's poetry, this essay reveals the extent to which sensation, being, and poetic meaning are, inextricably, enmeshed with one another. The subsequent detailed reading of Keats's 'To Homer' unfurl into a wider consideration of Keats's central poetic preoccupations in the 'Hyperion' fragments, several shorter lyrics, and 'When I have fears that I may cease to be', as well as the ways in which the verbal texture of these poems engage with their literary forebears and Miltonic, Shakespearean, and Byronic influences. The account offered here of the centrality of modes of seeing and seascapes (actual and imagined) to Keats's often existential and precarious poetic voyaging-outs (where 'on the shores of darkness there is light') goes to the very heart of Keats's own sense that writing poetry was comparable to the act of 'straining at particles of light in the midst of a great darkness'.