Seeking integral community
in an ecological age . . .


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The “Ecozoic Era” is a time of mutually enhancing relationships among humans and the larger community of life.

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The “Great Work” is living the promise of the ecozoic.

In this issue: “Sudden Discovery and Thomas Berry” by Margaret Berry, and “Biography of Margaret Berry.”

Sudden Discovery and Thomas Berry

Of the 151 tributes to Thomas Berry in the remarkable volume produced this year by Herman Greene and his Center for Ecozoic Studies, many contributors view their experience of Thomas’s thought as a sudden, powerful opening to a hitherto unsuspected major and life-altering reality. That reality might be expressed as the unity of a sacred Earth community in which humans are [but] the climactic part in a unified, divinely revelatory, evolutionary enterprise.

The suddenness of such an event, the abrupt coming upon a great truth with powerful impact and implication, has been treated memorably in one of the greatest short poems in English, John Keats’s 1816 sonnet On First Discovering Chapman’s Homer. Limited to Latin in his linguistic education, Keats had, until 1816, known Homer (the Iliad and the Odyssey) only through eighteenth-century heroic-couplet translations lacking the freedom and power of Homeric narrative. One evening a friend introduced 20-year-old Keats to George Chapman’s 1616 prose translation of the Homeric epics. The friends reportedly sat together till daylight reading the translation, Keats “shouting with delight at some especially energizing passages.” At breakfast the next morning Keats’s friend found the sonnet on his breakfast-table:

On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer
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-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 star’d at the Pacific — and all his men
Look’d at each other with a wild surmise —
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Essentially an analogy, the sonnet offers at its primary level three realities: 1) the explorer (mistakenly named) Cortez and his crew wandering about the Isthmus of Panama; 2) their sudden coming upon the Pacific Ocean, of which they had heard from natives; 3) the Pacific Ocean itself in all its expanse and grandeur.

At the secondary level the analogy equates 1) the explorer and his crew with Keats struggling to access the essential Homer; 2) the sudden sighting of the Ocean with Keats’s sudden grasp of the authentic Homer by means of the Chapman translation; 3) the greatness of the Ocean itself with the expanse and power of Homeric poetry.

Thomas Berry’s role in contemporary cosmological thought, I propose, is for many analogous with Chapman’s role as portrayed in the Keats sonnet. In other words, for many Thomas has functioned as a facilitator or translator of cosmological structure and history in leading people to grasp, to see, to understand for the first time the ultimate truth about human relations with nature, the universe, specifically with Earth. What I propose is, in short, that Thomas’s role may be appreciated with special clarity when seen as an analogy of an analogy.

In this analogy, at any one of the three levels proposed, there is the basic concept of seeing in its multiple sense of physical, intellectual, and psychic vision; ergo the repetition in the poem of the long ì (eye) 14 times, culminating in the ecstatic “wild surprise, silent” near the ending. Subterranean connections with the ego ì, also, cannot be dismissed. It is the poet’s gift so to organize sound, sense, and intuition into a perfect whole.

And nowhere did Keats more exemplify poetic genius than in his refusal to change the factually mistaken, but artistically exact, name of Cortez.* A lesser poet, by a “correction,” might have weakened the impact of the episode, not only metrically and phonetically, but also in the sense of character extension raising the poem from a particular to a universal insight. Other technical aspects of the sonnet resonating in Thomas’s “translation” have to do with images of vastness, as planets swim through the heavenly expanse mirrored in the Ocean below, and wherein see and sea are inextricably intertwined.

Like Cortez and his crew, we humans explore unfamiliar terrain for clarification of the truth about who we are, where we are, why we are, and how best to reach the ideal. Like Keats we often resort to the arts, sacred and secular, in our search for adequate answers. Like him we often need a translator to understand and interpret the answers we receive. For many Thomas Berry performs that task, and in that capacity has freed questors from the anthropocentrism vitiating recent history and from excessive emphasis on Redemption to the detriment and diminishing of Creation. He has, in fine, bridged the centuries-old chasm between humans and nature so that the part is reconciled with the whole and the ideal is achieved of a mutually enhancing relationship between humans and Earth.

Margaret Berry

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*Keats had been reading in William Robertson’s 1777 History of America about both Vasco Nuñez de Balboa (founding of the Pacific Ocean 1513) and Hernán Cortez (entering the Valley of Mexico, 1519), and in the heat of inspiration confused the two factually without in any way altering the sense of his statement.
BIography of margaret berry

Holding a St. John's University Ph.D. in nineteenth-century English literature (1956) and a University of Pennsylvania postdoctoral degree in South Asian studies (1969), Margaret Berry has, in addition to extensive college and university teaching, notably at John Carroll University, Cleveland, Ohio, authored three published books: *The Chinese Classic Novels: An Annotated Bibliography of Chiefly English-Language Studies* (1988), *Pegasus Over Asia: Ventures in East-West Literary Analysis* (1980), and *Mulk Raj Anand, The Man and the Novelist* (1971); numerous published articles; and two unpublished novels. She has received Ford, Fulbright, Danforth, and NDEA awards, among others, has held numerous offices and has traveled extensively in Europe, Latin America and Asia. Following her 1993 retirement, Dr. Berry has made her home in her native city of Greensboro, North Carolina, where she serves as liaison for Harvard University’s Archives for Environmental Science and Public Policy, which houses the papers of her brother, geologist, cultural historian, and author Thomas Berry.

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