

Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn": the monumental moment

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Most commentators on the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" fall into two groups: those who find it a good poem with an imperfect ending and those who find it an imperfect poem with a good ending. Few have come to terms with the poem as a whole, and those who have attempted to do so have had to resort to desperate means to wrest unity from it. None, so far as I know, has faithfully adhered to the text in a thoroughgoing manner, and interpretations rather hinge on material extrinsic to the poem—either Keats's life (as in John Middleton Murry, *Keats*)¹ or the terminology of the times (as in Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, "Appendix A")—material that is injected into it with meager justification. Even so distinguished a critic as Cleanth Brooks has failed to maintain the strict fidelity to Keats's metaphors that he claims is precisely the guiding principle of his interpretation.²

The reading presented here will follow the poem strictly, from first line to last, in the order in which Keats wrote it and in which he intended it to be read.³

Preliminarily, one should acknowledge that the speaker of the poem is vague, and although one cannot say for certain that it is Keats, one can say at least that it is a poet. In the very first word "Thou," an "I" is implicit, and one can say generally that in the movement of the poem, the distance between the "I" and the "Thou" will decrease through roughly the first half of the poem, and then increase again through the second half.

¹ Even as astute a reader as Helen Vendler, in *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), resorts to extrinsic biographical material when direct insight fails her.

² Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn* (NY, 1947). Although Mr. Brooks founders on the rock of the poem's ending because of certain presuppositions that he implicitly injects into his analysis, his method and insights with respect to the rest of the poem are rich and fruitful.

³ The text used is the one in the now authoritative *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Harvard U., 1978). [The text is also available in a "reading edition" of the same work, *The Complete Poems* (Belknap/Harvard, 1982).]

I

Initially, the urn is described (1-4) by means of an apostrophe to it. The urn (“Thou”) is a “still” (“motionless,” or “up to now,” or “ever to be”) unviolated bride: the urn is married to “quietness” (the groom), and the marriage has not been consummated. If one follows the metaphor of marriage through, one can say that a marriage is an implied consummation. In this instance, however, the consummation would involve, in the strict terms of the sexual metaphor, a paradox, for were the groom (quietness or calmness) to consummate the marriage through the requisite violent action, this would involve an abnegation of his very nature as calmness. Hence, the tension implicit in this unconsummated marriage seems irresolvable, so that if this marriage can never be consummated, then the possibility exists for an adulterous resolution of the tension, for example, between the urn and the speaker (the poet).

The bride’s (the urn’s) foster parents are “silence and slow time,” i.e., speechlessness and—if one may so infer—eternity or atemporality or stasis. In addition, one must at least raise the question as to who were her true parents. Whoever they might be, one can say with certainty that they have cast off their child after having generated it.

Perhaps—to digress for a moment—the metaphor of marriage and consummation (in the first two lines) is meant to evoke certain reflections about, or even is meant to represent, the poetic (or imaginative) process. If so, then this process, as seen here, would consist of the following phases: (1) becoming acquainted, i.e., a hesitant questioning approach to the beloved; (2) a period of courting, of falling in love, of becoming “engaged” to or in, the beloved; (3) the engagement itself, a period of being in love, of total involvement; (4) the ceremony; (5) the consummation (or lack thereof). On this basis, the “Ode” can be seen as a stanza-by-stanza mimesis of this process, although only gradually does one see the subtlety and irony with which the speaker handles the image.

To return to the “Ode” proper, the urn is a historian (either a story teller or a writer of histories) of, or from, the woods. She *can* express, i.e., she has the potential for speech, a potential which may be actualized through the course of the poem; she can express a tale that is either about flowers, or (in another sense of the word “flowery”) filled with falsely elegant language, or both, and she can do so “more sweetly,” i.e., less bitterly (or less harshly), than the poet. This last characteristic of the urn will be of continuing significance.

The remainder of the first stanza is a series of rhetorical questions that bring the speaker (the poet) closer to the urn. “What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape” implies that, in some sense, the urn and her legend (that could mean either a fabulous account or a concise key to understanding, as in a map) are separable. If one looked ahead, one could say that in the fifth stanza, the legend, in the second sense of the word, will be articulated, but one can already see implicit here a suggestion of its lifelessness, in the verb “haunts” and in the concomitant funerary suggestions that are lent to the adjective “leaf-fringed.”

Does the “legend” concern immortals (gods) or mortals (humans)? Is its setting in the immortal pastoral world (“Tempe”)⁴ or in the mortal pastoral world (“Arcady”)? Are the males gods or human men? Who are they? Who are the reluctant females? What is the pursuit, and why are the pursued fleeing?

In the final line of the stanza, there is introduced the possibility for music, something—in this context—more than silence but less than speech, and for “wild ecstasy,” something more than stillness but less than action in any meaningful sense.

Thus a series of tensions has become implicit so far, tensions of whose development one must be aware. One could sum them up as: (1) silence-speech, (2) temporality-eternity, (3) potentiality-actuality, (4) mortality-immortality, and (5) pursuer-pursued.

The first stanza ends, then, on a moment of perplexity rooted in amatory curiosity.

II

In the first stanza, and in the first two lines of the second stanza, a certain hierarchy is being established on the basis of the non-interrogatory opening of the first stanza: first, there is silence; then, unheard melodies, and these are sweet; then, there are heard melodies, which are sweet but less sweet than unheard melodies; and so on, until one arrives, if one is permitted this extrapolation, at speech, which would be the least sweet, i.e., the most bitter or most harsh.

There is an undertone of irony in what follows (11-14). In the description of the pipes as “soft” and of the “spirit” music (“ditties”) as “of no tone,” the physical connotation of these terms suggests a subterranean meaning here. With respect to the body, “soft” can mean “weak,” and “of no tone” can mean “lacking in vigor” or

“unmuscular.” Therefore, this music “of no tone,” which would suggest something like pure mathematics—these ditties, however ostensibly superior they may be, are lacking in vitality and passion. However, this is only an undertone here.

What one may call the “never” lines (15-20) are directly addressed to the figures on the urn. First, to the “Fair Youth” (15-16), the musician who can *never* leave his song under trees that will *never* be bereft of leaves. Second, to the “Bold Lover” (17-18), the lover who “never, never” will kiss. Third, of the beloved (19-20), that she will *never* fade. It should be noted here that the dash punctuation, which will recur in stanza five, is used to separate some especial comment of the speaker (poet).

The irony of the second stanza is indicated in the rhymes of the sestet, for the implication is that “bliss” is equivalent to “kiss;” and that not only can the trees never be “bare,” but neither can she who is ever “fair” (beautiful) be “bare.” If bareness, however, is in some sense truth, which is harsh and not sweet, then *beauty cannot be truth*, because truth involves grieving; but in this context, not only do you not grieve, but also you *cannot* grieve, just as you *cannot* leave (15).

Finally, of the three figures described, only two, the musician and the beloved, are beautiful (“fair”). The lover, it is implied, is ugly, or at least suggests ugliness, grief: the ugliness of unfulfilled desire prompts the lover to grieve. However, the poet sees only beauty. Hence, the poet—now become “caught” (i.e., on the verge of engagement) in the world of the urn—reprimands the lover with “yet, do not grieve.”

The speaker now is so enamored of the freeze of forever that he sees only the permanence but is blind to what is lost in it. This mood of “For ever” in the last line leads to the third stanza.

III

The third stanza is the central stanza of the poem. The speaker (poet) enters this stanza “caught” completely in the world of the urn, but then he begins to ‘escape.’ The escape enables him, in the fourth stanza, to see things about the urn that he could not have seen prior to this and culminates in his confrontation with the urn in the fifth stanza.

In what one may call the “forever happy” lines (21-27), “Forever” occurs five times

⁴ Although the point of it will not be evident until the fifth stanza, there may be a poetic joke in using a

and “happy” six times. The accumulation of these words tends to deflate them. They become illusory and take on a pejorative connotation. The sweet, illusory vision of the urn must give way to the bitter, actual vision of the poet.

The tension indicated here is reinforced by the ambiguity of line twenty-eight. Typically, commentators have taken this line to mean that the urn is superior to (“far above”) human passion, but it is far from clear that this is so. For one could—and more consistently with the direction of the poem—read it to mean that it is human passion that is “far above” the figures on the urn.

From this, then, one could conclude that “breathing,” even harsh and difficult breathing, would be preferable to (above) not breathing and that the bitterness of actuality (which is “high-sorrowful,” “cloyed,” “Burning,” “parching”) would be preferable to (above) beauty as represented by the urn (i.e., the classical conception of beauty).

The urn, therefore, reveals itself as a sheep in wolf’s clothing, and no sooner is the wolf’s clothing torn away than the sheep appears. The speaker (poet) will emerge as someone who prefers wolfness to sheepness.

IV

In the fourth stanza, a ceremony is about to be performed, a sacrifice is about to be made. This suggests the questions: What must be sacrificed in order that the “forever happy” may exist? What must be placed on that “green altar”? At this point, the first suggestion of life enters the poem. On the altar will be sacrificed a being that is *alive*, a “heifer lowing at the skies,” expressing its vitality, vitality of which it must be deprived. Here one might observe that lowing, as the heifer’s equivalent to speech, prepares the way for the emergence of speech in the fifth stanza. In addition, the *life* that the sacrificers have left behind is another sacrifice. Of that life (namely, the missing town that the speaker/poet apostrophizes), there is left only silence, which is here equated with desolation.

Looking back to the first stanza, one can infer that the urn’s foster parent who euphemistically was called “silence” is actually desolation.

Finally, in addressing something that is not on the urn, i.e., the altar and the town,

name for the immortal setting that evokes the Latin word for “time” (*tempus*).

the speaker (poet) leaves the world of the urn, and thereby leaves its illusory happiness. What the urn presents in the guise of forever, therefore, is not only illusory happiness, but also and especially that which is implicit in the lack of consummation—the silence that is desolation.

V

In the fifth and final stanza, which presents the confrontation of the poet and the urn, the poet addresses the urn harshly.

The puns (41-42) to which Kenneth Burke⁵ has so convincingly referred, indicate the tension: “brede...over-wrought” means, on the surface, ‘the embroidery-like decorations wrought upon,’ but below the surface, it can mean ‘breed overwrought,’ i.e., excited breed. The subterranean meaning evokes the sexuality and vitality of which the figures on the urn are drained. When all is said and done, the men and women are only “marble,” the “forest branches” will never generate seeds, and the “trodden weed” will never spring back in untrodden freshness. Now the speaker (poet) reproves the urn for its silence, i.e., its desolation. The urn has assimilated her nurture, i.e., she has assimilated the characteristics of her foster parents, “silence and slow time,” but she has rejected her nature.

But what is her nature? In other words, who are her ‘natural’ (true) parents? Can one not infer that the urn’s true parents, her *natural* parents, are speech and fast time? In other words, inverting the equation of silence and desolation, her parents are fullness and temporality, and their characteristics are all the qualities that the urn has rejected, what one might call qualities of life—passion, activity, pleasure, pain, grief, warmth, and so forth. So, the parentage of the urn is the parentage of any work of art, namely life. But the artist of the urn has not been able to preserve that in the work. The speaker (poet) seems to be implying that the classical ideal in art is deficient, that Grecian standards denigrate precisely what it is the function of art to elevate, namely human passion. In other words, classical antiquity elevated cold, bloodless, abstract reason at the expense of the human, the all too human.

It is not that the poet denies intelligence but that intelligence or “thought” must be for life if it is to be truly human, and here “thought” is set in opposition to eternity, a

⁵ A *Grammar of Motives*, “Appendix A.”

denial of the affinity between thought and eternity that was so characteristic of the ancients. This is a modern poem in which thought is defined as in the service of action. The urn deprives us of our humanity in a twofold sense: *qua* thought and *qua* generation. The human condition is “woe,” that which abides and mocks the false solace that the frigidly marble urn offers. The immutability and inflexibility of the urn stand in sharp contrast to the realm of generation, change, becoming. The inconstancy of becoming is the only truly constant thing. The poet, then, is a modern Herakleitean.

Therefore, in a remark that must be fraught with sarcasm, the poet calls the urn “A friend to man.”⁶ And now the urn speaks, but only because the poet speaks for her. However, what she would say if she could speak has already been discovered by the speaker (poet) to be false (see IV above). Therefore, as soon as he articulates it for her, he⁷ angrily replies to her and to the figures wrought upon her, “—that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”⁸ The “ye” (predominantly used as a plural, but sometimes as a singular) addressed here seems to be the urn herself or the urn and the figures on her, and the implication is that I, or we, need to know more, much more, than this.

Hence, the poet does not consummate his affair with the urn: the end of the poem has brought us back to its beginning in a circle that mimics the circularity of the frieze on the urn, a circularity that—in this context—incarnates the insularity of the cold comfort that the urn offers. The stereometric mass of the urn is belied by the planar world that it presents so enticingly. In the final analysis, the speaker (and the readers) want and need the fullness of dimensionality that life—and an art that would represent life truly—offers.

⁶ The sarcasm is implicit from the very first line of the stanza, for example in the word “attitude,” which indicates that the urn has adopted a pose, a posture, an appearance that lacks substance. The tone is reinforced by the Attic/attitude jingle, the use of exclamation marks, and the phrase “Cold Pastoral!” Stillinger is on the right track when he says, “The closing lines present a special problem in interpretation, but...while the urn is not entirely rejected at the end, its value lies in its character as a work of art and not in its being a desirable alternative to life in the real world.” (Reading edition, 469) Stillinger’s studied caution (“not entirely”) causes him to hedge rather than to draw a firm conclusion.

⁷ Cf. Stillinger, Reading edition, note ad 49-50 (470): “there is considerable uncertainty about who speaks the last thirteen words of the poem.”

⁸ Again here, as in stanza two, the dash would signify an especial comment of the poet (see II above).