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KEATS'S IDEAL IN THE ODE ON A GRECIAN URN

BY JACOB D. WIGOD

ROOTED in awareness of pain and flux, Keats's odes of 1819 reveal the poet's desire to escape the painful actual and seek repose in beauty, in the ideal. More than any other of the odes, the implicit subject of the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is the ideal itself. While the permanence of art is the poet's bulwark against flux, it is not the ultimate perfection that he seeks. Too many inner tensions, as the poem develops, shape the ideal into something much more complex, unattainable in either life or art since it encompasses *both* life and art. Keats's attempt to define this ideal accounts for the difficulty of the concluding lines. The purpose of this paper is to try to illuminate Keats's mode of thought and feeling as he wrote the poem and thereby, perhaps, to approach more closely his meaning.¹

In the first stanza Keats or the speaker, standing apart as it were, gazes at the urn contemplatively. It is an object to muse upon, isolated in the dignity of its ancientness—whole, undisturbed, quiet. The observer is aware that at *his* point in time it exists for him but that it has existed for countless generations before him. More than that, it is a "sylvan historian" that speaks to him silently out of the past, relating a "leaf-fringed legend" of long ago, when gods walked in the vales of Tempe and Arcadia. Though the urn itself is silent, the poet sees that its detail depicts a revelry—mad pursuit, struggle to escape, pipes and timbrels, wild ecstasy. He asks the questions that any curious observer might ask: What do these actions signify? Who are these men or gods? Who are these maidens?

As he asks these questions, he comes closer and imaginatively enters into the scene before his eyes. In the second stanza, therefore, the urn as object fades from sight; the poet gives us, instead, a close-up of its detail. He accepts now the anonymity of these figures, men or gods;

¹ Among recent critics Kenneth Burke, Cleanth Brooks, Middleton Murry, Allen Tate, and Earl Wasserman all read the ode as a form of dramatic or symbolic action. There are, however, at least two distinct approaches. Burke, Brooks, and Tate are concerned with the structure of the poem itself; on the other hand, Murry and Wasserman, while concentrating on the poem, also try to infer from earlier writings the *poet's* framework of thought and emotion. The second method has its pitfalls but when reasonably pursued is, I believe, the best way to study the work of a Romantic poet. Keats is as much a part of the ode as the urn itself. Some of the tension and urgency of the poem is lost when it is examined simply as artifact. Burke misreads the poem, while Brooks and Tate—though (or because) they are conservative—miss the underlying tension. The present paper is necessary because there are disturbing flaws in the readings of both Murry and Wasserman.

indeed takes pleasure in their anonymity and silence, since the keen delight of imagining is left to him:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.

Since they are unknown, the figures assume a general identity that verges on the symbolic. The fair youth piping songs beneath the trees, since he is of unknown place and unknown time, may be regarded as the artist—poet or musician—of any place and any time. So the lover pursuing the maiden may be regarded as any lover and the maiden as any beautiful woman who is loved; or, more broadly, these figures are symbolic of love and beauty. In the real world, the poet has mourned, Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes (*Ode to a Nightingale*) and the lover's mistress dwells with Beauty that must die (*Ode on Melancholy*). But the tree, piper, lover, and maiden will always be enjoying or about to enjoy: the tree, its green leaves; the piper, his song; the lover, his pursuit and passion and the hope of winning his bliss; the maiden, her spirited youth and radiant beauty. The graceful movement and living action of human creatures—moments of being and becoming, aspiration and growth—have been caught and held, suspended permanently in art.

In the third stanza the poet rejoices in the ripeness that has been rescued from time. Yet his rejoicing is not unmixed with nostalgia and sorrow, reflected in the repetition of "happy," a word that bears much emotional stress in the odes. He longs for the ideal in nature, art, and love as they are represented on the urn (ll. 21–27). The lines about love are almost unbearable in the intensity of their yearning. His grief comes to the surface and with it the painful recognition of the vast unbridgeable gulf separating the ideal from the real—the perpetual renewal of warm, young love on the urn from the throes and fever of breathing human passion in real life.

This sorrow pervades the following stanza and unites it emotionally with what has preceded, though it is unrelated thematically. We are, I suppose, to imagine the poet turning to another scene depicted on the urn, for he is once more the curious observer asking particular questions. This scene as the poet presents it to us—the priest leading the heifer to sacrifice—is most lifelike in its detail:

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?

Keats felt, no doubt, that the poem had to be rounded off by a stanza

that would give the reader a more complete sense of time and place, a more fixed impression of that far-off Grecian age in which the urn itself was fashioned. So, though the stanza is not about the permanence of nature, youth, love, and beauty in art and its transiency in the real world, the description of the pagan ritual creates in our minds a definite picture of the society in which these human figures moved. The little town “by river or sea shore,/Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel” further widens our knowledge of background. And the poet’s feeling for the little town further deepens the compassion that runs through the whole poem:

And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate can e’er return.

These lines are somehow more moving, even, than the poet’s compassion for melodist, lover, and maiden. The town in all its desolation suggests total silence, just as the sacrificial rite, the priest leading the heifer lowing at the skies, suggests ancientness and slow time.

In the last stanza the poet again stands apart from the object. He is no longer absorbed in it; it stands before him, a “shape,” an “attitude,” a “silent form.” Its timelessness is awe-inspiring: it teases him out of thought as does eternity.² Standing silent and inscrutable, it is too large an object for human comprehension in the sense that, while it records history (“sylvan historian”), it possesses a long history of its own; it spans innumerable generations, innumerable creations and destroyings. We cannot *think* about it, we can only *wonder* at it as we wonder at eternity. It shares the coldness of eternity—Cold Pastoral!—unfeeling, imperturbable, the figures etched on its surface frozen, requiring a meeting of the mind, an active imagination, to give them warm life. The poet’s mood at this point is comparable to his feeling in the *Ode to a Nightingale*,

² There are, it seems to me, at least 2 other possible meanings for this difficult line (44): first, that the poet’s total absorption in the urn precluded thought, so powerful was his aesthetic experience; second, that the urn was a means of escape from thought about the pain, the conflict of good and evil in human existence. Of these 2 interpretations I am inclined to think the first more likely.

This expression (“tease out of thought”) also occurs in the *Epistle to John Hamilton Reynolds* (ll. 76–77). The context is:

Oh never will the prize,
High reason, and the lore of good and ill
Be my award. Things cannot to the will
Be settled, but they tease us out of thought.

I confess I do not know exactly what Keats means here. I should guess that “high reason and the lore of good and ill” are the “things” that “cannot to the will be settled.” That is, he cannot determine to acquire high reason and the lore of good and ill without finding that these aspirations are too immense, too much for his intellect to grasp (like the urn, like eternity) at once; hence, he is teased out of thought.

after the spell of the nightingale's song is broken: "Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!" In the midst of ecstasy (imaginative flight) he experiences joy and exultation, but he always faces reality at the end. "A sense of real things comes doubly strong . . . like a muddy stream" (*Sleep and Poetry*); he makes the long "journey homeward to habitual self" (*Endymion*); fancy is a "deceiving elf" (*Ode to a Nightingale*); and the urn is a cold pastoral. Yet even when absorbed in the urn, he knew that art was not so fine as life, just as marble men and maidens are not so fine as breathing human beings.

The principal tension in the poem comes from this awareness that what he most enjoys in life—warm, youthful sensuousness, love and beauty—must be spontaneous and fluid, ever-changing, if they are to retain their special vitality and charm. They belong to life, not to art. Art may resist flux and perpetuate lover and maiden, but, dead and cold in itself, it can only *represent* life. No matter how great an effort of the imagination is made to endow these figures with breathing, sensuous life, they remain but a semblance of life, a "brede of marble men and maidens." So he feels compassion not only for the lover who will grow old and the beautiful woman that will lose her lustrous eyes in real life (*Ode to a Nightingale*), but also, in art, for the lover who will never attain his goal and for the town that will be forever desolate.

He wanted, then, two irreconcilable things: life in its ever-changing fullness—the lover's ardor, the flush on the maiden's cheek, her sparkling eyes, her alternating moods and caprices—and he wanted to arrest these ripe moments and hold them permanently. The second desire clearly stems from the first. It is the result of his sheer zest for living, the natural gusto with which he seized life, and the accompanying profoundly melancholy awareness that all passes, all is flux. Art was to embody his ideal but, ironically, he found it deficient in life. Nervous unrest in life was replaced by placidity and calm in art; passion and fever, by tranquillity; disorder and chaos, by order and harmony; flux, by permanence. Since life is a flow and subsists in change, the flow of blood within and the flow of time and circumstance without, in addition to the constant physical action of the body, then the essential nature and vitality of life itself is negated when transfixed in art. There is a stoppage of the circulation, or stasis, and a suspension of both time and circumstance. Nothing is left but form.

In life the passage of time brings completion. Unless a change in relationship occurs or untoward circumstance intervenes, the lover in real life consummates his love and thereby wins his bliss; while the sculptured lover, subject neither to chance nor change, is always about to enjoy, but never enjoys. Keats would certainly choose to be the lover

pillowed on his fair love's ripening breast despite the "sweet unrest." He would first desire the breathing reality even though he (and she) could not have the steadfastness of a star or even certainty of the immediate future. But in the very midst of joy he is conscious that in time's continuum beauty fades, man and woman grow old. Time has its revenges, brings in its train the final completion, death. What he really desires is the ripeness of youth, its joy and bliss, lasting forever. His ideal, in short, is the best of both worlds, what he can have neither in life nor in art alone.³

Cold pastoral! One can almost feel the arrow-sharp disappointment as the magic is dispelled and the warmth of the poet's absorption in the urn is replaced by the chill of his objective scrutiny. A familiar pattern in Keats—initial detachment leading to absorption in the dream and the ideal, followed by rejection—has been repeated.⁴ The two words seem final and irrevocable, destructive of all that has gone before. They are, however, an honest expression of *part* of the poet's whole aesthetic experience. Balance is restored by the concluding affirmation, which signifies that the poet has made the necessary compromise. He realizes that the urn is indeed a cold pastoral, several removes from life, but that it is nonetheless beautiful.

To Keats beauty, the object of his pursuit in *Endymion* and his solace in *Hyperion*, was an attribute of the ideal. By sympathizing with humanity and by directly experiencing the real, Endymion had won Cynthia, or ideal beauty, for his bride. *Endymion* was allegorical of the artist's quest for the ideal, embodied in Cynthia the moon-goddess. In the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* beauty, though intrinsically desirable, is not a passive ideal to be reached for in a rarer atmosphere than the earth's; rather, like the nightingale's song, it possesses active power to soothe everyman's mortal pain.⁵ Hence the poet addresses the urn:

³ Wasserman sees the poet's conception in a similar light: "No one," he writes, "will deny that the ode, like most of Keats's poems, deals with the human and mutable on the one hand, and the immortal and essential on the other; and that what it states has something to do with both an opposition and a fusion of these two states." This delicate balancing at the very bourne of heaven, this "paradoxical essence" is, in Wasserman's view, "the central principle of Keats's visions." He calls it—borrowing a term from Kenneth Burke—"mystic oxymoron." Accordingly, "although the ode is a symbolic action in terms of an urn, its intrinsic theme is that region where earth and the ethereal, light and darkness, time and no-time become one; and what the symbolic dance ultimately discovers is the way in which art (the urn) relates man to that region" (*The Finer Tone*, Johns Hopkins Press, 1953, pp. 14–16).

⁴ Cf. *Sleep and Poetry*, ll. 47–162; *Endymion*, ll. 273–280; the original conclusion of *The Eve of St. Agnes*; and *Ode to a Nightingale*.

⁵ The climax occurs at this point of tragic awareness, in the final stanza. Wasserman is surely wrong in assuming that the climax occurs at the end of the 3rd stanza. Illuminating Keats's conception of the ideal, he makes no allowance for his growth. He holds that ideas

When old age shall this generation waste,
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
 Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*

Beauty is truth, truth beauty: the generalization is so dazzling that it almost blinds us. We cannot, of course, determine precisely what the poet means, but we can try first to find his meaning in the context of the poem itself. "Truth" is the more difficult word to explain. Clearly, it is not the same as the tragic truth of *Hyperion* and the *Epistle to John Hamilton Reynolds*; it has nothing to do with pain or the strife of good and evil. Since the ode is about a work of art that embodies the ideal, "truth" here may mean "highest value," or "highest reality" in the sense closest to "the ideal." Similarly, "beauty" in the ode is not synonymous with that beauty in *Hyperion* which mirrored the wisdom, wrought in agony, of Apollo and the inner grace and knowledge of the Olympians. Rather, the ode reveals a twofold conception of beauty: first, the warm,

expressed in the letter to Bailey about the imagination (22 Nov. 1817) together with important passages in *Endymion* (1817)—principally, the "pleasure thermometer" (l.777 ff.) and the "Hymn to Pan"—constitute both the framework in which the ode is set and the key to its meaning. In the ode, the poet's "ascent" from nature (the boughs) to music (the piper's song) to love (lover and maiden) parallels the ascent to the "chief intensity" in *Endymion* (l.777 ff.). The poet, by the close of the 3rd stanza, achieves a complete "empathic entrance into essence" ("fellowship with essence") and so reaches heaven's bourne. The statement "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," according to Wasserman, would logically occur at this point, if it were "the total intention of the poem," since that is what the poem up to that point has been saying. "The intention of the poem," he decides finally, "must be to hold up art as the source of the highest form of wisdom," since the urn speaks the "aphorism" in the last stanza (pp. 37–39, 49). Thus the conflict within the poet, which should be pinpointed since it is the drama of the poem, is allowed to fade into the background. In 1817, to be sure, Keats's subject was young love and the ideal beauty that he would win by humanitarian sympathy. His poetic ladder of ascent (*Endymion*, l.777 ff.) was still a luxury, a "pleasure thermometer"—a plan rather than a deed accomplished—and his humanitarianism a Wordsworthian endowment. But by 1819 the axiom had been proved on his pulses: in the interim he had experienced suffering, and he had written the fragment of an epic. His subject now was the melancholy of change and pain, and the ideal (the nightingale's song, the urn) was not so much an object of pursuit as an active comforter of human suffering. The right key to the meaning of the ode is not *Endymion* but, as Murry saw, the letter on the Vale of Soul-Making (14 Feb.–3 May 1819).

* That Keats meant the urn to speak the last 2 lines is clear from the transcripts made by Charles Brown and Richard Woodhouse (Houghton Library), and the transcripts of George Keats (British Museum) and Dilke (Hampstead House). Punctuation in all transcripts is basically as follows: "Beauty is Truth,—Truth Beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (Brown). See Alvin Whitley, "The Message of the Grecian Urn," *Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin*, No. 5, ed. Dorothy Hewlett (London, 1953), pp. 1–3.

pulsating beauty of lover and maiden in real life, which Keats had portrayed so glowingly in *Isabella* and *The Eve of St. Agnes*; and second, the beauty of art, which can preserve and give some idea of the original living, sensuous human beings. What he seems to be saying, then, is that life itself in full blossom, ardent and unselfconscious, is to be cherished as the ultimate reality: it is all (that is, the utmost) man knows on earth and all he needs to know.⁷

Filling in gaps here and there, we can also, I think, deduce from the poem Keats's line of reasoning about the beauty of art. Through perception and, above all, expression of beauty the "poor forked creature," man, attains the peak of his cultural development. A work of art like the urn represents man's highest point above the animal since it is a manifestation of the spirit. (Therefore, the poet asks "What men *or gods* are these?" and desires the pipes to play on, "not to the sensual ear" but to "the spirit ditties of no tone.") Once in ancient Greece a sculptor captured and locked fast the youthful ecstasy of piper, lover, and maiden for all succeeding generations of men to see and wonder at and enjoy. Thus man can perpetuate himself and win the same immortality in art that the nightingale achieves by its song.

Although the line "Beauty is truth, truth beauty . . ." can bear all the weight of interpretation I have laid upon it, it is nonetheless a brilliant failure. Some readers have considered the affirmation a meaningless appendage; on the contrary, I believe the poet tries to say too much.⁸ The word "truth" implies a final answer which the poem itself does not give; I feel that the poet is trying to say more in the concluding lines than he has said in the course of the whole poem. Too much has to be inferred. The structure and content of the poem will admit of no such all-embracing generalization.⁹ Keats tries to condense in five words what Tolstoy

⁷ Kenneth Burke assumes that "beauty" is "the essential word of art or poetry" and that "truth" is the essential word of knowledge or science. Then he tries to reconcile the "oracle's" statement that "Poetry is science, science poetry" by showing how, in 5 stanzas, the transformation was made which enabled "the romantic philosophy of a romantic poet to transcend itself" (*A Grammar of Motives*, New York, 1945, pp. 447-462). He does so with extraordinary agility and insight, but his conclusion (p. 462) is unconvincing. One feels, with Tate, that "Mr. Burke's own dialectical skill leads him to consider the poem, when he is through with it, a philosophical discourse" (*On the Limits of Poetry*, New York, 1948, p. 178). Crude equations like this cannot contain an imaginative poet's *vision*. Keats's line elicits a wide range of response. I. A. Richards would object to any such "translation"; he would say that Burke himself has failed to distinguish between *emotive* and *scientific* statement (*Principles of Literary Criticism*, London, 1925, p. 267).

⁸ I believe, with Richards, that the line is "the expression of a certain blend of feelings" (*Practical Criticism*, London, 1929, p. 187).

⁹ Cleanth Brooks, however, considers the lines to be a fitting conclusion. He would waive the "question of the scientific or philosophic truth of the lines" (which Burke tries to resolve), in favor of applying the principle of "dramatic propriety." The urn's speech,

later said successfully in *War and Peace*, about the beauty of life in full flow, all that man can know on earth. Tolstoy was detached and saw human existence, as someone has remarked, with the eyes of God. He remained above, looking down, while he allowed himself ample space and time. Keats, on the other hand, is much too close to the object; he cannot escape absorption in his vision of the ideal; and his emotional participation in the happiness of the figures portrayed on the urn forms a strange contrast to the final detached, impersonal declaration. And in these last, brief words he wants to say something about the beauty of art as well as the beauty of life's youth, love, and spring! It is the mark of his genius that he nearly succeeds.

What Keats is really stating, prematurely in the poem, is his "favorite speculation," which he had recorded for Bailey in November 1817. Then he had said: "What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth. . . . The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth. . . . It is a 'Vision in the form of Youth,' a Shadow of reality to come." This idea was joined to "another favorite speculation" of his, "that we shall enjoy ourselves hereafter by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated. . . . Adam's dream will do here and seems to be a conviction that Imagination and its empyreal reflection is the same as human life and its Spiritual repetition."¹⁰

Now if we turn to the lines again, they may appear in their true light, as an affirmation of faith:¹¹

"modified by the total context of the poem," is as appropriate as the speech of a character in a drama. The urn, he concludes, says that "'formed experience,' imaginative insight, embodies the basic and fundamental perception of man and nature. The urn is beautiful, and yet its beauty is based—what else is the poem concerned with?—on an imaginative perception of essentials. Such a vision is beautiful but it is also true" (*The Well Wrought Urn*, New York, 1947, pp. 140–142, 150–151). On the other hand, Murry and Tate agree with T. S. Eliot that "*in the context of the poem itself*" the lines appear to be a blemish, an intrusion; for Murry, they "disturb the subtle harmony of the poem" (*The Mystery of Keats*, London, 1949, pp. 163–164). Tate considers them a "radical violation" in the "set limits" of the ode: "The poem gets out of form," a "break in 'point of view' occurs" (pp. 179–180).

Whereas Brooks is perhaps too detached to do justice to the stresses in the poem, Murry is too absorbed. In his worship of Keats he tends to view the poem almost as mystical utterance, in which "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" becomes a saying of the same order as "God is Love" (p. 174). Consequently, the question of meaning is dissolved in wonder and mystery.

¹⁰ Cf. Newell Ford, *The Prefigurative Imagination of John Keats* (Stanford Univ. Press, 1951), pp. 138–140. *Letters*, ed. M. Buxton Forman, 4th ed. (Oxford, 1952), p. 67.

¹¹ I. A. Richards would call a statement like "Beauty is truth—" a "pseudo-statement," by which he means in some instances something very close to "an expression of faith." It is the poet's way of ordering and controlling his experience, emotions, and attitudes (*Science and Poetry*, London, 1926, pp. 58–59).

Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Since faith is outside the poem and has been superimposed, as it were, these lines can be read only partially within the context of the poem. The poet's vision, like Adam's dream, controls the ode at this point and transcends, at the same time that it includes, all that has gone before. We now understand why the poet declares that the urn will always remain a friend to suffering man. What solace, we might have asked, can an urn that depicts youth, love, and merriment, give to aging and suffering humanity whose burdens increase as youth fades into the past? An apparent contradiction is resolved when we consider the transient beauty portrayed on the urn as "a Shadow of reality to come." Old age will indeed rejoice and be comforted in the knowledge that this "Vision in the form of Youth" will be a permanent reality in the next world. Meanwhile actual beauty, fleeting as it is, is all man knows *on earth*, and all he needs to know. But, speaks the poet's faith, "we shall enjoy ourselves hereafter by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated."

Art has transcended natural laws of time and flux; out of time, the artist has created the timeless; out of flux, the permanent. The urn itself, like Keats's poetry, was "a Vision in the form of Youth," an "empyrean reflection" of the imagination. More specifically, it was the objective correlative of that faith in beauty which, throughout his poetry, underlies Keats's conception of the ideal. He wanted desperately to extend to life itself the permanence of this ideal which he cherished in myth, art, and poetry. To do so required firm religious convictions, an unwavering belief in man's immortality, but his natural scepticism militated against orthodoxy. In his last year he still "longed to believe in immortality." While he fluctuated in his religious belief, he had to struggle sometimes even to maintain wholehearted faith in the ideal. Harsh actuality battered and burst through his defences: the urn becomes a "cold pastoral," the nightingale's song, a "plaintive anthem." He asks, at the end of the *Ode to a Nightingale*: "Was it a vision or a waking dream?" The word "vision" belongs to the language of faith and refers to the ideal. By affirmations of faith in the urn and the nightingale ("Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!"), he strove to believe against all doubts in the ideal, with the same fervor with which he prayed for the spiritual repetition of human life.

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