LITERATURE

THE ROMANTIC IMAGE IN KEATS'S *ODE ON A GRECIAN URN*

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> ... yes, in spite of all,
> Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
> From our dark spirits. [1]

The *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is a complex metaphorical statement on poetry of the Romantic school of writing. In the rich drama and irony of Keats's poem, the Grecian urn still plays the principal role for several people today; but at the centre of that drama and irony is the unacknowledged role of the author himself. Indeed, modern criticism tends to underrate Keats's role while paying increasing attention to the depth of his poetic metaphor. The main point of this essay, therefore, is to assert the neglected and reviled context of a personal involvement in artistic creation. Of course, it is well known that Keats as an author can put up a deliberate hostile attitude towards the Romantic subjectivity and inclusion of much biographical detail in poetry. Yet his reasons for behaving thus are often being misconstrued, unfortunately, by most of the later critics who apparently share the same sentiment and prejudice about good creative writing. [2]

The first four stanzas of the poem show us what we may call John Keats's two characteristic habits or attitudes of mind. The one records mere visual impressions as he surveys his subject; the other is that style of his for wandering off (i.e., from the object of contemplation) momentarily into the world of fancy so as to interpret and reflect upon what he sees, in this case the actuality of the urn before his eyes. As the poet stands perplexed and enthralled with

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[1] The quotation is taken from Keats's poem *Endymion*. In Groom (1959 : 1). All references are to this edition of the poems of Keats.

[2] Some valuable discussion of the style of Keats in this poem and others may be found in Fraser's critical anthology (Fraser 1971).

what he sees on the urn, he asks a number of amusing questions about the curious situation of some young men chasing a band of shy maidens:

> What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
> What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
> What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? [3]

Still reflecting upon the general experience of the first, Keats in stanza two is plunged again into the world of imagination as regards that moment of "mad pursuit" and "wild ecstasy" recorded and already eternalized by the clever but unknown sculptor. For Keats observes that as long as this urn remains intact — having as yet been undisturbed perhaps in a corner of the museum — the springtime atmosphere and the boisterousness of life in a grove where the festival scene depicted on his urn takes place, assuredly, will for ever be the same. Also, the pursuit of love and pleasure as symbolized by the actions of pipe-players and ambitious young gallants becomes undying and its enjoyment (because not yet attained) a perpetual possibility.[4] As a result of this exquisite ironic feeling and utterance, Keats goes on to set up a kind of contrast (mostly in stanzas three and four) between the desolation of age and time and the timelessness of human youth, passion and genius as depicted by the Grecian sculptor and shown vividly to our poet through the urn.

However, it seems to me that in the final stanza of his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Keats is trying to regain a balance. The urn, addressed in a mood of joy and wonder, is for ever before his eyes. But everything about it is for once rightly appreciated; it is merely an "Attic shape", that is, a Grecian urn "with brede/Of marble men and maidens overwrought..." The words "shape" and "over-wrought" used here may suggest an idea of unreality or artifice. The crucial utterance "Fair attitude!" carries furthermore the tone of ecstasy as well as that momentary disillusionment which the poet also expresses in lines 4 and 5:

> Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
> As doth eternity: [5]

As I have earlier pointed out, one must imagine the poet engaged in one thing, surveying "marble" pictures and characters on the urn, at the same time that his mind or imagination is wandering off to another, trying to tell us more

[3] Keats, J. *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (Groom 1959: 25—27).

[4] See the opening lines of "Burnt Norton", one of the poems in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quarters*, where there is a modern philosophical statement on this theme. We may also find an element of satire or humour in Keats's eulogy, since pagan characters and rural life in general fascinated Londoners (e.g., Pope, Johnson, Hazlitt and Keats himself) in a curiously odd way from the 18th to early 19th centuries.

[5] Keats, J. *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (Groom 1959: 25—27).

than is actually visible to him and ourselves. "Tease" has this important sense of distracting the mind but not in an irritating or impolite way. For example, in stanza four where Keats surveys another side of the urn and sees a "mysterious priest" together with a crowd of men shown in the manner of ancient Athenian Greeks about to sacrifice to their gods outside city walls, his wandering thought goes back to an empty "little town" from which the "folk" obviously set out "this pious morn" in a long procession. In the same way he has reflected (before now in stanza two) upon the plight of a "bold lover", by assuring him that his loved one and object of "mad pursuit" — the country maiden at large — "cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss".

In the last stanza Keats's whole attitude towards the Grecian urn seems to have changed totally. Rather than be further enthralled, he regards it with anything but deep ecstasy and satisfaction. Despite the mysterious power of the urn to lure the poet to other thoughts and fancies, the "Sylvan historian" appears to be the usual motionless, objective thing in the final stanza, yet maintaining the same chaste qualities described in the first two lines of the first stanza. The phrases "Cold Pastoral!" and "Thou, silent form" seem to me to suggest the poet's own sense of profound surprise and wonder. For, in all his questionings as well as aberration into fanciful thought about the timelessness of that world of art, the urn remains quite silent, cold, and averse from the touch of passion. It is as we might expect an extreme case of a "still unravished bride of quietness" to behave towards an infatuated lover such as Porphyro in *The Eve of St. Agnes*. Another perhaps disagreeable effect on him of the urn's timid or bashful attitude (as for instance, in "Fair attitude!" Keats is meaning to say, "what a pretty cruel behaviour to a friend!"), is that while he stands envious and perplexed before an illusory world of art and pleasure, he feels somehow tricked to have been taken outside time into eternity. The universe of "marble men and maidens overwrought" on the Grecian urn is now teasing or flirting with Keats. That is to say he has wandered momentarily to where there is no change, no time, no desolation. And since to be conscious of change is to be in time, as one critic (Eliot 1952; 13—22, 141—6) argues, Keats is also out of the realm of consciousness. But change in time and the problem of existence, as regards things described in a pre-Athenian context, are the realities of a world of "thought" and manhood from which no lasting or profitable flight, like Keats's escapism, is possible.

The problem of life and death or the awareness of pleasure and suffering mostly suggested by the urn, seems to remain inalienable for Keats and the entire human world. And so, the second part of this last stanza may be the poet's attempt to console all who would find themselves in his present dilemma, that is, those future generations of artists and amorous gallants. For the one concrete impression he would like them to get from the Grecian urn is that of the permanence and elusiveness of beauty which it suggests quite vividly

to us. This idea alone seems to be the central truth that a silent and cold object such as the urn is able to communicate. Thus, if Keats himself is eager to confirm the statement: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty", merely inferring as he has done in earlier stanzas from impressions created by particular situations and experiences, it appears to me a fair last consoling act. After all, we realise that nobody, not even the addressed urn, hastens to answer his many (rhetorical) questions. Moreover, the poet is inspired at first from the promise of continuity of beauty preserved in art as symbolized by an ageless and unwithered form of the urn. If Keats could tell a "bold lover" of the continuity of his desire and the impossibility of ever fulfilling it, why may he not therefore go ahead to consider this sculptured beauty as the only worthy thing because it is attractive and endurable in a world where mundane values are changing rapidly and nothing else can please as long as a Grecian marble urn?

There is an element of irony in the poet's apparent change of attitude towards the sublime urn and his willingness to recommend to mankind the praise and worship of its rustic "beauty" or "truth". Indeed, this concluding irony suggests a likely dramatic role for Keats as the number one speaker and supreme interpreter of the urn's activity or message throughout his poem. His own speech and manners here consist of wit, thoughtfulness, curiosity, or intellectual search for knowledge and order in life. The setting itself presents an elusive figure as the humane and death-bound poet sings in praise of a monument of unageing intellect (Jackaman 1975; 236—46). And this setting offers the best chance for a drama more vigorous through its variety than the latent contradiction or paradox we notice in the image of Grecian urn so cleverly analysed by one American critic (Brooks 1968a: 124—35). If anything gives modern readers lasting pleasure, therefore, I admit it is this irony and the dramatic context where it occurs and likewise sums up its ancillary aesthetic function at the poem's climax that we ought to stress in our critical evaluation. The work is John Keats's self-drama in reality — but less the drama of his urn, as Cleanth Brooks and others would say. The type of Keatsian literary experience here is not far removed from the pattern in his *Ode to a Nightingale* where, for instance, the poet's self-revelation comes out forcefully and more than is often noted in respect of his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.[6] I think that one may be right, after all, in placing Keats as a nineteenth-century moralist at the centre of everything, even to the extent of proving that he speaks in more clear terms than the urn itself. But what needs our special attention most is not Keats's sentetiousness and imprudence, as critics since Victorian days have observed particularly in the last two lines of his poem. Instead it appears that his attitude towards the urn continues to

[6] See Fogle (1947).

waver or change from unqualified attention to the object of praise and scrutiny to incipient anxiety, questioning, scepticism, close analysis of situation, and private judgement about the urn's mysterious character and message. At each stage of his song he is behaving in a rather different state of mind. But then, Keats is not unwilling to accept the Grecian urn as "truth" or "beauty" for all it stands for in the poem: chastity, cold and teasing love, unfulfilled desire, eternity of pleasure and suffering. This is why I should sometimes hesitate to use the word "partial" to qualify his own understanding and judgement in regard to that work of art, the urn, for he sees it as a sort of novelty which he is curious to analyse.

If anything, Keats has acted the role of a "sylvan historian" like the urn he admires, just because he can quickly balance several attitudes or qualities that in the end allow for an "objective" personality of a critic, and for that overall dramatic awareness created by both speaker and metaphor in his poem. He is not always ready to conceal his fascinated and perplexed nature, his hopes for a budding poet-lover, and also his gloom at the sight of death as endless longing for fulfilment amidst unrewarded, sylvan adventures. To imply the various attitudes and ideas in the same poem, Keats does not choose to play a consistent single role of lyric singer from beginning to end by just teasing with the Grecian urn in abstract terms which T. S. Eliot, for his own personal needs in a later century, prescribed for such a kind of symbolic event. Keats on the other hand sees the message of the urn — and of course, his own in a parallel poem — as a moral rather than an abstract aesthetic one. This urn is truth and beauty in the pre-Athenian culture; hence it remains the permanent thing, the lovable thing, and the paradoxical thing. His rustic history as a poem may therefore not be the modern type which avoids a sentimental Whig interpretation of data, or indulges in accumulation of mere facts but passes no visible judgement. Concluding his perusal of a "sylvan historian" called the Grecian urn, for instance, Keats appears to have assessed everything and endorsed his research into the work's history or identity with a restatement of its role, which happens also to be that of the Romantic artist himself. That is to say, poetry (Gk. *poesis* 'making') as a kind of criticism of life is just as he finds it displayed by an unknown Attic sculptor serving here as a model for others like Keats to emulate. Poetry as an intuitive awareness of reality shows something that is varied, beautiful and all-inclusive; its multi-faceted style is roundly pleasing with fact and fiction, epigram and imagery, history and philosophy. This sense of poetry entails some irony, of course, which forms the basis of a dramatic setting and utterance, as has already been noted above. It is implied again in Keats's final and sudden agreement: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty".[7]

[7] See Eruvbetine (1981).

Hitherto Keats has been eager and doubtless unable to know the "truth" — that is, the unspoken idiom and unrevealed beauty may nevertheless be precious and adorable, the chaste and elusive maiden superior to a housewife or prostitute, the uncomposed song sweeter than a loud and barren one; and finally the desolated streets of one country town in ancient Greece offer sublime and factual details about human nature or experience (for example youth and old age, passion, disease, war, anxiety, ritual and sacrifice among Athenians) which, for us, are possible and interesting news items instead of the inhabited cities ruled by some mythic kings and emperors unknown to that Attic sculptor and obnoxious to a nineteenth-century English poet like Keats.

It therefore can fairly well be said that the poet's object of beauty and truth is ironical, that it is a plain embodiment of a number of ambiguous and contradictory things around us. Actuality, illusion, seeming lies and truths inhabit the urn. From that object one hears speech in an apparent state of silence, or one sees coldness in artistic vitality as a feature of the world of Attic sculpture and dramatic poetry like Keats's. What the poet leaves unsaid is present between the lines and could always be filled in by a critic doing his correct job without hypocrisy and partisan interests. But one may also ask: How well can anybody speak for and interpret a silent historian, demagogue, priest or deity? Is it not *ultra vires* of any observer like Keats to voice out the urn's hidden message to society at large, and yet convince us of his decency? Also, if merely to despise the sophisticated urban modes of life and communication drives a Romantic artist to eulogize rustic beauty and marble works of art that are occasionally crude, would that attitude therefore make his own creative genius and moral principle worthy of serious attention by posterity?

However, it does appear that the poet expects us to evaluate his marble beauty and Romantic artistry as a combination of polish and rudeness. Like Keats, we can in fairness see the urn — and his own nature poem — as something emblematic of native impulse and discipline, eloquence and mystification, logic and digression, and so forth. This reading of *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is, of course, prompted by an aspect of the Romantic world-view and theory of art enunciated by Keats himself somewhere in his letters. Now, to us, everything in Keats's statements on early nineteenth-century art, society and morality may seem obvious at a glance into many works on his biography, but it is characteristic of the rhetoric of criticism in the age of Eliot and Leavis that so much ambiguity created by an element of personal emotional drama in Keats's writing has often been overlooked without any sign of hypocrisy.

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