Keats's Silent Historian: The "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

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In Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale", the speaker seeks to escape and transcend the world of change, decay and death through a flight "on the viewless wings of Poesy"[1] into the intensely beautiful world of the nightingale. He wants to share the "ecstasy" (l. 58) of a creature which, unlike himself, has never known the conditions inherent to human life: the pain, the suffering, the death of the young, the sense that nothing can last "[w]here Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,/Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow" (ll. 29-30). In the "Ode on a Grecian Urn", which appeared immediately after the "Ode to a Nightingale" when the poems were first published together,[2] the speaker contemplates a work of art which embodies this conquest of misery, transience and mortality. What the speaker of the "Nightingale" ode had sought unsuccessfully through poetry, the artist of the urn has achieved for the figures he has created: they are full of beauty, vitality, passion and creativity, but are immune to the effects of time. Yet, although the speaker does address the urn and the figures on it, he never strives to join or fuse with them, as the speaker of the "Nightingale" ode had with the bird. It is an "Ode *on*", not an "Ode *to*",[3] and the tone is correspondingly more detached. And this detachment, particularly evident in the last two stanzas, arises from the speaker's growing realization that to arrest a moment of ecstasy may also be to arrest a moment of desolation.

The two opening lines of the poem draw attention to the urn's close association with silence and time. After the death of its artist it was, so to speak, fostered out to "silence and slow time",[4] and then maintained the connection with silence by becoming the "bride of quietness" (l. 2). Both the urn's silence and its capacity to survive through the ages are qualities which preoccupy the speaker throughout the poem, and they are emphasized too in the implications of the phrase "still unravish'd" (l. 1): the urn has not been damaged in the centuries

1 "Ode to a Nightingale", l. 33, in Jack Stillinger (ed.), *John Keats: Complete Poems* (Cambridge, Mass. and London 1982), pp. 279-81.
2 In Keats's *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, and Other Poems* (1820). Both were written in May 1819, but it is not certain which was the earlier.
3 W. Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (1963; repr. London 1979), p. 510.
4 "Ode on a Grecian Urn", l. 1, in Stillinger, pp. 282-3.

since it was made—or perhaps, as the "bride of quietness", has not been forced to speak.[5] It is interesting however that at this early stage of the speaker's response he does not describe the urn as being silent or long-lasting in itself, but as being "related" to these qualities—it is as if he is not yet quite able to define exactly what it is.

The following lines assert that its association with silence and time gives the urn a power of expression superior to that of poetry:

> Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
> A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme.
> (ll. 3-4)

But the speaker, who can only communicate through such "rhyme", asks the urn a series of questions, piling them on one another so as to create both a sense of urgency and an impression of excited, spontaneous response to the figures on the urn, as if he is turning it round in his hands and reacting to everything as he sees it:

> What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
> Of deities or mortals, or of both,
> In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
> What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
> What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
> What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?
> (ll. 5-10)

But the urn does not identify the figures as "deities or mortals", specify where they are, or explain the "mad pursuit" and "wild ecstasy"—it cannot answer these kinds of questions, and in failing to give any account of the scenes on it, it fails in fact to fulfil the role expected of an "historian".[6] It may "express" in its still marble the feelings of the maidens, the madness of the chase, the wildness of the ecstasy, but the speaker has not been able to "ravish" it away from silence.

In the next stanza, however, the speaker leaves off his questions, as if acknowledging that the urn's special way of communicating does not enable it to answer them. The celebrated dictum which begins it

> Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
> Are sweeter . . .
> (ll. 11-12)

claims in fact that the urn's silent music is superior to earthly tunes.

5 "still" here could mean "as yet", or "motionless", or both.

6 Cleanth Brooks, "Keats's Sylvan Historian: History Without Footnotes", in his *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947; repr. London 1968), p. 127.

Just as the urn-historian tells its story "more sweetly" than poetry, the melodies of the piper on the urn are "sweeter" than those heard on earth because they speak "to the spirit" rather than to the "sensual ear" (ll. 13-14). So, having come to understand and value the urn's means of expression, the speaker goes on to examine the scenes represented on it more closely, and to discover the paradox they convey.

The scenes described in the second and third stanzas encapsulate three important aspects of life on earth: the natural landscape, sexual love, and artistic (more specifically, musical) creation. It is springtime, and the trees are covered with leaves; the passionate lover is on the point of catching his beautiful beloved; the piper of silent, spiritual melodies is endlessly creative. Each has been caught at a moment of intensity and held there for all time, so that spring, the maiden's beauty, the youth's love, and the piper's songs are made eternal. It is the ideal for which the speaker longed in the "Ode to a Nightingale", for now "Beauty" can "keep her lustrous eyes" and "new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow". He celebrates the fact that the lover will love "[f]or ever" (l. 19), with a love "[f]or ever warm" and "[f]or ever panting" (ll. 26-7), a maiden who "cannot fade" (l. 19), while the "happy, happy boughs!" will always keep their springtime leaves (ll. 21-2) and the "happy melodist" has perpetual powers of invention (ll. 23-4).

Yet parts of the speaker's response here suggest a more ambivalent attitude to this apparently enviable state. Before celebrating this eternal happiness, he has acknowledged that trees, lover and piper are all restricted in some way by their privileged condition:

> Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
> Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
> Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
> (ll. 15-17)

The trees and piper have no choice but to continue as they are—note the use of "can" rather than "will"—and although the beloved maiden may remain beautiful forever, the lover can never reach her. Moreover, the last three lines of the third stanza, although ostensibly celebrating again the kind of passion represented by the love-pursuit scene on the urn, can also be interpreted as hinting at the inadequacies of the life which the urn portrays:

> All breathing human passion far above,
> That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
> A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.
> (ll. 28-30)

The idea that the love it expresses is "above" human passion recalls the earlier assertions that silent art is superior to audible poetry, spiritual music better than sensual. But a heart which is "cloy'd" has at least reached its goal, unlike the lover on the urn, and has thus reached an intensity of feeling of which the latter is not capable—"burning" and "parching" rather than merely "warm" and "panting". An earthly, sensual lover can at least "burst Joy's grape against his palate fine",[7] as the "Ode on Melancholy" was to put it, experiencing joy, albeit destroying it at the same time. There is even the sense that the speaker is finding the scenes on the urn difficult to describe—he writes of the superiority of the "love" shown on the urn largely in terms of what it is not,[8] and otherwise relies heavily on the repetition of "happy" and "for ever". All this reflects perhaps is the speaker's inability to find words in "our rhyme" adequate to paraphrase the urn's "flowery tale"—but it could mean that his response to the figures is flagging, that his own world of change and suffering is easier for him to imagine.

The idea that the speaker is having trouble in maintaining, or expressing, his enthusiastic response to the scenes on the urn is perhaps borne out by the next stanza, where he turns to another scene and reverts to questioning his silent historian:

> 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?
> (ll. 31-4)

And once again, of course, the urn fails to answer him: the "priest" he addresses can tell him nothing about the meaning of the sacrifice, and he and his companions remain "mysterious". But this time, instead of desisting from his questions and acknowledging the superiority of the urn's silence to speech, the speaker probes further, speculating now about a scene not actually depicted on the urn:

> What little town by river or sea shore,
> Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
> Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
> (ll. 35-7)

The people on the urn have become so real to him that he can imagine their life "outside" the urn. But in achieving this heightened response,

7 "Ode on Melancholy", l. 28, in Stillinger, pp. 283-4.
8 Bate, *John Keats*, p. 514.

he realizes that, if the townspeople are all transfixed in one spot, forever on the way to the sacrifice, then they will never return to the town to communicate the meaning of the ceremony, and so the town itself will remain forever silent, empty, desolate.

> And, little town, thy streets for evermore
> Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
> Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.
> (ll. 38-40)

The use of "for evermore" recalls the "for ever" repeated in the preceding stanza, but this time it refers to eternal silence and emptiness, not eternal passion, and the added syllable expresses a strong sense of finality. To arrest a moment in time means not only to preserve beauty, springtime, artistic creativity and love, but also to preserve ignorance and desolation. Moreover, whereas the unsatisfied lover portrayed on the urn will at least remain "warm" and "panting", a procession towards a religious ceremony has no value unless the ceremony itself takes place. Carrying out the sacrifice would presumably have propitiated the gods or provoked some kind of omen from them, but this has not happened—it is only through activity, process, that the figures could undergo an experience which spoke "to the spirit".

Ironically, then, it is when the speaker's response to the urn is at its most intense that he begins to draw away from it, a change reminiscent of the "Ode to a Nightingale". At the point that he aspires to share the bird's "ecstasy" through the "rich" experience of death, he realizes that death would instead cut him off irrevocably from the nightingale, making him but a "sod" (ll. 51-60). Here, he has become so involved with the "life" of the figures on the urn that he can construct a town for them in his imagination, only to become aware that their eternally static condition means that they will never return to it. He comes to reconsider too the "silence" he had earlier believed to be superior to sound: the urn cannot tell the speaker, "sweetly" or otherwise, even the potential significance of the sacrifice, and the town's complete and unalterable silence communicates nothing "to the spirit" but desolation. Hence in the last stanza the speaker seems to distance himself from the urn, both physically and emotionally. He apostrophizes it:

> O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
> Of marble men and maidens overwrought.
> (ll. 41-2)

As in the opening lines, he is looking at it as a whole, but it no longer

has the quasi-human qualities suggested by the epithets "bride" and "foster-child". Instead, it is an object, an artifact, whose "shape" or "form" (l. 44) is more notable than the life-like quality of the figures on it—they are only ornamentation in marble after all.[9] It is almost as if the speaker is becoming an "historian" himself, and is defining or labelling the urn with the only facts the "silent form" will yield him.

But the poem does not finally dismiss the urn as an attractive but trivial object of little value to mankind. The speaker's attitude remains ambivalent, as is made especially clear in ll. 44-5:

> Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
> As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!

It remains mute, a work of art which seems remote, even forbidding, but it impresses us in the way "eternity" does—it still has a spiritual quality. Keats had used the expression "tease us out of thought" in his "Epistle to J. H. Reynolds" to refer to the things which "cannot to the will/Be settled",[10] and the speaker's varying response to the urn throughout the poem does suggest that it falls into that category. The phrase implies I think that the urn baffles and perplexes man, that it, like "eternity", is beyond his comprehension—possibly even, that if it did give answers to his questions, he would not understand them.

In the last lines of the poem the speaker tries to spell out the meaning the urn can have for mankind. To a large extent, it has the same function as the nightingale's song, which, although immortal and hence unlike the fleeting "hungry generations" of men, can be a recurrent source of comfort to them:

> The voice I hear this passing night was heard
> In ancient days by emperor and clown:
> Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
> Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
> She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
> (ll. 63-67)

Similarly, the urn's "eternity", its continuing survival through "slow time", makes it essentially different from man, who must inevitably suffer and die, but also enables it to offer friendship to each generation:

9 Here "attitude" has the technical meaning of "the disposition of a figure in statuary or painting" (OED), not the modern sense. "Overwrought" could mean "worked up to too high a pitch; overexcited" (OED), or simply "wrought (i.e. worked) over".

10 ll. 76-7; Stillinger, p. 181.

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man . . .
(ll. 46-8)

The nature of this friendship seems to be explained in the last two lines of the poem, but in a way that has bewildered many readers and caused more critical debate than anything else Keats wrote:[11]

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.
(ll. 49-50)

Part of the problem is deciding who actually speaks these lines, and to whom. Grammatically, the aphorism, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" seems to be a message from the urn to mankind (". . . a friend to man, to whom thou say'st/'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' "), but it is not clear whether or not the remaining line and a half is part of the same message.[12] It could be the speaker addressing the readers, asserting hence the all-sufficiency of the urn's message for mankind, or the speaker addressing the figures on the urn—that is, defining all they know and need to know on earth, without necessarily believing that this knowledge is adequate for man. However, I think that the whole of the two lines is probably a message from the urn to mankind, since a second change of speaker would be very abrupt.

If this is so, it seems that the urn has been accorded an absolute value and ultimate authority, in that it prescribes the limits of knowledge for mankind. Perhaps, speaking of its own beauty, it is saying that this is beyond normal human understanding, a beauty which, teasing us out of thought like eternity, transcends human concerns and values to become an absolute, a truth. It is as if the urn can make us aware of the ideal Platonic forms behind corrupt matter, as one of the

. . . lovely apparitions,—dim at first,
Then radiant, as the mind, arising bright
From the embrace of beauty (whence the forms
Of which these are the phantoms) casts on them
The gathered rays which are reality—
Shall visit us, the progeny immortal
Of Painting, Sculpture, and rapt Poesy.[13]

11 Many of the possible interpretations are canvassed in H. T. Lyon (ed.), *Keats's Well-Read Urn* (1958).

12 There are quotation marks around the motto in Keats's 1820 volume, but not in the original published version in *Annals of the Fine Arts*, January 1820, nor in any of the four transcripts made by Keats's friends.

13 P. B. Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, III, iii. 49-55, in Thomas Hutchinson (ed.), *Poetical Works* (Oxford 1943; repr. 1970), pp. 246-7.

The difficulty with this is that the speaker of the poem has already drawn attention to limitations in the urn, in both the kind of life it expresses and the kind of information it can communicate, limitations which might make it a dubious source of ultimate wisdom. It can after all be seen merely as a "Cold Pastoral". The temptation is then to read the urn's message ironically, as reflecting its own limitations: the urn may be asserting that the beauty it embodies is some kind of all-sufficient truth for man, but since it knows little of life "on earth", its "friend" man—and the reader—must be sceptical about the validity and value of its message.

Another way of approaching the problem is to recall (as many critics have done) Keats's letter to Benjamin Bailey of 22 November 1817, in which he wrote, "What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not".[14] Keats was speculating at this stage of his life that the products of the imagination have a real existence, even if they do not exist in the world of "objective" reality, in the world normally apparent to the senses. By the time he wrote the odes, he was coming to doubt this,[15] but the statement is still illuminating, since what the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" shows is, not indeed a creation of something out of nothing by the speaker's imagination, but his strong imaginative response to a beautiful artifact. And it is a response which gives him some insights: he "seizes" the urn's "beauty" and it yields him "truth". It reveals that art can embody escape from decay and mortality, expressing eternal spring, eternal creation, eternal beauty, eternal love—but that it can also imply coldness, impotence, stasis, unfulfilled potential. By the same token, human beings can leave off their songs, consummate their love, fulfil their religious observances, but their life inevitably entails changing seasons, fading beauty, hearts "cloy'd" with passion, the flagging of artistic invention. Moreover, our awareness of this disparity between art and real life can make us feel that art is remote from us, lesser than us, like a "Cold Pastoral", or greater than us, like "eternity". In other words, the "truth" expressed by the urn's "beauty" is the poem we have just read.

14 Robert Gittings (ed.), *Letters of John Keats: A Selection* (Oxford 1970; repr. 1977), p. 37.

15 For example, in the "Ode to a Nightingale", "fancy" is said to "cheat".