

## 'Impassioned Clay': Reading the Grecian Urn

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### I

As a starting point, it may be said that criticism [of Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*], perhaps as a consequence of its own historical needs as much as any imperatives towards ultimate truths, seems to be moving to a position whereby the poem is interpreted through the hypothesis of a 'speaker' or 'dramatic' persona, who is held at a distance from the 'poet' whom we conceive to be behind the whole artifact. . . . this controlling persona, whom we shall call the 'poet', can be seen to exercise a parodic or ironic overview, placing in a critical light the attempts of the speaker to cull meaning and moral guidance from the silent object before him. As such, the poet would seem to provide that level of heightened self-consciousness and stable positioning which we now tend to call 'metalinguage' or 'metacommentary'.<sup>1</sup>

The critical distinction between two voices or consciousnesses in *Ode on a Grecian Urn* that David Simpson here takes as 'a starting point' for his discussion of the poem I want to adopt as a starting point for my own. However historically contingent or merely fashionable, the distinction itself is surely a difficult one to deny. One might argue as Coleridge does of Wordsworth's 'The Thorn' that, as a dramatic monologue, the *Ode* is unevenly sustained, creating occasional confusions<sup>2</sup>. Or as Simpson himself does that the 'speaker' and 'poet', commentator and metacommentator, dissolve into a paradoxical synthesis at a crucial point. The distinction may be said, technically, to obtain between two

1 David Simpson, *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry* (London and Basingstoke, 1979), p. 8.

2 In the *Biographia Literaria*, chapter XVII; see *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 7, ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate, in 2 vols (Princeton, N. J., 1983), II, 49-52.

personae or to inhere within a single persona<sup>3</sup>; may or may not be seen to represent 'a dialogue of the mind with itself'<sup>4</sup> and may even be interpreted as reflecting a contradiction at the heart of early nineteenth-century petty bourgeois ideology with regard to its yearning for cultural appropriation<sup>5</sup>. But for the moment at least, the relative validity of any or all of these readings is of less concern than that the distinction they assume is there, in the poem itself. The speaker, wilfully misreading or overreading the urn, says too many things that are irrelevant or self-preoccupied or just plain silly for him to be trusted as an authority. On the contrary, what becomes apparent quite early is an authority to distrust him — to distrust, say, the overly earnest attempts to communicate with an inanimate object; the militant idealism; the manic repetition of the word 'happy' in the third stanza, this last at once discomfiting and yet categorically different from earlier Keatsian embarrassments like 'slippery blisses' and 'Pleasure's nipple' in *Endymion*.<sup>6</sup>

To the genuine authority, on the other hand — the 'heightened self-consciousness' and 'controlling persona' carrying the responsibility for the whole poem — Simpson gives the title of 'poet', though the title itself is 'strictly a descriptive convenience'<sup>7</sup> because the speaker, and only the

<sup>3</sup> 'Keats's persona', according to Lore Metzger, 'is at once spectator and actor, distant observer and empathic participant . . .'; in his *One Foot in Eden: Modes of Pastoral in Romantic Poetry* (Chapel Hill and London, 1986), p. 230.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Arnold on the decadence of Romantic poetry in the Preface to the *Poems* (1853); see *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. A. Dwight Culler (Boston, 1961), pp. 203-214 (p. 203).

<sup>5</sup> As Marjorie Levinson argues; see the Introduction to her *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 1-44.

<sup>6</sup> *Endymion*, II, 758; 868. Though I choose the 'notorious' phrases defended by Christopher Ricks in the fourth chapter of his *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford, 1974), p. 104 and ff., the radical difference in rhetorical function should excuse me from entering the lists.

<sup>7</sup> *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry*, p. 10.

speaker, actually characterizes himself as a poet. What we have in Simpson's scheme, then, is a poet proper and a poet improper, the poet proper 'controlling' the attempts of the poet improper 'to cull meaning and moral guidance from the silent object before him' while simultaneously 'placing [them] in a critical light'.

Two things follow from the prevailing model of the poem outlined by Simpson. The first is that what is at issue here has as much to do with readers and critical reading as it has with poets and poetry<sup>8</sup>, especially insofar as reading involves a collaborative *poesis*, or making. And it is true that our attention in the *Ode* is focussed neither on the poetry *per se* nor on the aesthetic object (the urn), but on the prevailing consciousness of the speaker/ beholder and his responses to and relations with that object. Moreover, insofar as critical reading or the culling of 'meaning and moral guidance' also invokes questions of human motive and of human 'being', then the *Ode* is an essay on the process of *apperception*: that perception or 'reading' of either nature or art 'which reflects, as it were, upon itself' — to quote the eighteenth-century philosopher Thomas Reid — 'by which we are conscious of our own existence, and conscious of our own perceptions'<sup>9</sup>.

The second thing that follows is that the speaker is a 'straw poet' only, a fiction to enable the poet proper to 'exercise a parodic or ironic overview' and enforce his 'heightened' vision. Were it a 'dialogue', it would be Socratic, allowing as it does the poet improper only such rope as he needs to hang himself. But it is in fact no dialogue at all. Not only is the poet proper wiser, he is also ontologically prior and superior;

<sup>8</sup> Compare Paul H. Fry: 'The "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a hermeneutic lyric that offers itself by way of example as a theory of interpretation', though Fry is not concerned, as I am, with reading and with how the poem can and should be read; see his *The Poet's Calling in the English Ode* (New Haven and London, 1980), p. 248.

<sup>9</sup> See under definition 1, *OED*.

as creator and controller, he is more 'real' than his improper counterpart.

Yet for all that superiority, as a 'persona', the poet proper is no less a fiction. Certainly neither poet in Simpson's account is *the* poet, John Keats, reference (let alone deference) to whom is as fastidiously avoided as it was once promiscuously indulged. 'One does not talk about authors these days without bowing to the irony of the times', to quote Marjorie Levinson<sup>10</sup>. And this, in spite of the fact that the term 'persona' *necessarily* invokes the poet or the person whom we cannot but conceive to be behind 'the "poet" whom we conceive to be behind the whole artifact'. According to Roland Barthes' now classic, if controversial distinction, the 'Author' has been replaced with a 'scriptor'<sup>11</sup>. Yet even if, as Lawrence Lipkin argues (after Barthes), 'the author is himself a creation — or, I would prefer to say, a "project" — of the writer'<sup>12</sup>; and even if the writer were a creation of John Keats and John Keats was 'perhaps not speaking from myself; but from some character in whose soul I now live'<sup>13</sup> (to quote Keats himself, or not himself, as the case may be) — still, the question of a responsible subject is only, if indefinitely, postponed.

<sup>10</sup> *Keats's Life of Allegory*, p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with his text, is in no way equipped with a being preceeding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*'; in his 'The Death of the Author', in *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London, 1977), pp. 142-8 (p. 145).

<sup>12</sup> In his 'Life, Death, and Other Theories', in Jerome McGann (ed.), *Historical Studies and Literary Criticism* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1985), pp. 180-198 (p. 187).

<sup>13</sup> In a letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818; *Letters of John Keats*, sel. and ed. Robert Gittings (London, 1970), p. 158.

## II

I draw attention to all this, not to indict the critical distinctions so clearly articulated by Simpson or any theoretical, anti-humanist pedantry, any more than I draw attention below to the confusion in Miriam Allott's annotations to the Longman edition to indict 'traditional' humanist criticism of intellectual laziness. My point is, rather, that the languages and assumptions of a variety of recent criticisms both betray and highlight precisely the problems of critical reading and creative apperception with which the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is itself concerned.

The proprietorial claims of the absent author are a case in point. Authority, responsibility, and accountability for the work of art are implicit in the opening metaphors alluding to the ancient, absent craftsman who 'fathered' the urn that has since become 'a foster-child of silence and slow time' (l. 2). The significance of this putative genealogy only gradually becomes apparent, first as the poet asks of the urn questions that, presumably, only its original creator would have been qualified to answer —

What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape  
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,  
 In Tempe or the vales 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)

— and, following that, as the speaker of the poem begins to arrogate an interpretative authority and to use the urn as a focus for his own anxieties. Only belatedly, that is, does the word 'foster' invoke an interest in origins and original intentions, and thus in the 'real' or 'natural' parent of the urn — the potter/sculptor — from whom 'silence and slow time' have taken over and whose life, it is suggested, is the 'sacrifice' or price paid for the urn's fragile immortality.

Questions of authority and of the provenance and status of the urn or work of art do not begin with the second line, however. The opening apostrophe to a 'still-unravish'd *bride* of quietness' has already established the urn's contingent or relational existence; indeed, its essential openness or vulnerability to appropriation — an archetypal image of the feminine that would not have worried Keats in the least, especially as it undergoes such ironic qualification<sup>14</sup>. 'Given away' by its/her father, who thus resigns his proprietorial rights, the urn as bride lies fallow ('still unravished') before the husbandry that will bring its/her meaning and value to fruition. But beyond this conventional exchange lies the paradox peculiar to the work of art: 'alive' only in marriage, it remains 'still [= unmoving], unravished', 'still [= as yet] unravished', and 'still [= always] unravished' or impenetrable — like the unbreeding 'maidens' on its brede. When the speaker in the *Ode* discovers to his frustration that the world of the urn will not yield to his various needs and cannot be married with his own world, what he experiences, in effect, are the full implications of his own metaphors.

Implicit in the images of the virgin bride and the 'foster child' is the idea that, while each successive generation is responsible for the work of art once it has been fathered by an artist and a culture, none can own it — any more than that father or artist could own it, being obliged to relinquish it to society (through marriage) and to history (through his own death). And Keats, as father to the poem, is implicitly compared with the dead craftsman, as is the poem with the urn. 'Words as voiced may at least appear to be backed up by the presence of their speaker', to quote a recent linguistic theorist; 'words as written are quite clearly cut off and

<sup>14</sup> In an otherwise sustained reading of 'the specific way the *Urn* defines and structures femininity', Daniel P. Watkins does not mention the 'bride' as subject and symbol of a patriarchal exchange; see his *Keats's Poetry and the Politics of the Imagination* (London and Toronto, 1989), chapter 5 (p. 108).

*orphaned* from any such authority'<sup>15</sup>. Fostered out to silence and slow time, and like those 'Things semireal such as Love, the Clouds &c which require a greeting of the Spirit to make them wholly exist'<sup>16</sup>, the meaning and value of the urn/poem are contingent on the collaborative response of successive 'readers'. Thus Keats's implicit theory anticipates that of historicist critics like Jerome McGann:

Once the poem passes entirely beyond the purposive control of the author, it leaves the pole of its origin and establishes the first phase of its later dialectical life (what we call its critical history)... — the moving pole of its receptive life...

From any contemporary point of view, then, each poem we read has — when read as a work which comes to us from the past — two interlocking histories, one that derives from the author's ... purposes, and the other that derives from the critical reactions of the poem's various readers. When we say that every poem is a social event, we mean to call attention to the dialectical relation which plays itself out historically among these various human beings<sup>17</sup>.

What this does not mean, for Keats at least, is that these successive beholders or readers can suit themselves. On the contrary, interpretation may involve acts of misreading of the kind exemplified by the poem's speaker in his wilful negotiations with the configurations on the urn. The urn passively 'resists' its own construction as an otherworldly paradise, for example; its own arrogation or appropriation to the meditative and affective intensities of the beholder and its own enlistment in his meaningless debate on the relative merits of art and life<sup>18</sup>. And though less obviously, so too

15 Richard Harland, *Beyond Superstructuralism: The Syntagmatic Side of Language* (London and New York, 1993), p. 8 (my italics).

16 Keats to Benjamin Bailey, 13 March 1818; see *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Gittings, p. 73.

17 'Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism', *MLN*, XCIV (1979), p. 993.

18 To quote Ronald A. Sharp: 'the real focus...is on the function of art in life rather than on any tension between the two'; see his *Keats*,

does its very indifference — its silence and coldness — resist his ‘academic’ attempts to explain it away as an archeological, aesthetic, and metaphysical curiosity in the final stanza:

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! With brede  
 Of marble men and maidens overwrought,  
 With forest branches and the trodden weed -  
 Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  
 As doth eternity. Cold Pastoral!

(ll. 41-5)

In spite of the invitation that it offers ‘to the spirit’ (l. 14) or the Imagination — and on the issue of sensual *versus* spiritual music the speaker’s logic and motives are, as always, dubious; in spite of its nullity in the absence of a beholder, still it maintains an integrity and remains in part responsible for its own being-as-meaning or artistic expression.

Having been ‘given away’ to society and time, then, the ‘flowery tale’ (l. 4) that is the urn’s being-as-meaning cannot be identified exclusively with any original intention. As the intentional ‘express’-ion (l. 3) of a (now dead) potter/sculptor, however — a tactile *and* emotional pushing-out, seeking two corresponding forms of ‘relief’ — it will either resist or accommodate the intentions of any one of its beholders. If it is infinitely interpretable, in other words, it is also radically misinterpretable, interpretability necessarily implying the possibility of more and less accurate, more and less faithful interpretations. The speaker of the poem variously misinterprets, fails to interpret, and over-interprets the urn-as-art or urn-as-meaning.

### III

Rounding back to the obvious analogy with certain types of recent theory, it is curious that the reaction against what is understood to be the traditional, paternalistic concept of ‘the Author’ — ‘in the same relation of antecedence to his work

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*Skepticism, and the Religion of Beauty* (Athens, Georgia, 1979), p. 151.

as a father is to his child', according to Barthes<sup>19</sup> — assumes (while it condemns) the father's full rights of possession and of control over the very identity of his child, a nonsense that is as revealing of the cultural origins of much modern theory as it is of its identification with the reaction against senescent authority that can be found in a reductive, archetypal pattern of romantic comedy.

More importantly, however, 'bowing to the irony of the times' by eliminating authorship often forces critical language into anthropomorphic absurdities, with poems and personae engaged in the willing, controlling, and judging that can no longer be attributed to dis-integrated linguistic or institutional constructions like authors yet cannot be surrendered indifferently to the arbitrary interests of any or every reader. Otherwise inert, aesthetic objects become agents that not only design themselves, but exercise their own imaginations. In truth, however, like 'the dead' (to quote Conrad), poems and personae 'can live only with the exact intensity and quality of the life imparted to them by the living'<sup>20</sup>.

My point here is that, again, Keats has anticipated the displacements and obliquities constrained by recent theory. Analogous to the anthropomorphic gestures of recent criticism are those of the speaker or poet improper of Keats's *Ode* when he attributes to what are lifeless physical objects and artistic fictions utterly inappropriate powers of active self-determination, as well as pleasure and pain ('yet do not grieve' he enjoins the figures in line 18). And while we are on this point, the ancient Attic ritual of Bouphonia (recorded here by the historian Pausanias) has implications that in the light of the fourth stanza become irresistible:

They place barley mixed with wheat upon the altar of Jupiter Polieus. . . . The ox who is prepared for the sacrifice touches

19 See above, n. 11.

20 *Under Western Eyes* (Harmondsworth, 1957), p. 253 (Part fourth, chapter 1).

these fruits when he reaches the altar; and the priest whom they call Bouphonus, or the ox-slayer, hurling his ax at the ox (for this is the sacred custom), flies afterwards hastily away. But those that stand near, as if they did not see the striking of the ox, lead the ax to judgement.<sup>21</sup>

Of poems as of murders: who done it?

There are, moreover, other similarities between the speaker's and our own respective critical activities that should not be lost to the sense we develop of our superior awareness. Our persistent attempts critically to resolve the enigma of the *Ode* and, within and as the key to that, of the last two lines, for example, might be transcribed as a series of urgent questions addressed to a 'still unravish'd', 'still, unravish'd' poem<sup>22</sup> — a series of questions resembling the speaker's unanswerable battery in the first stanza:

What leaf-sing'd legend haunts about thy rhyme  
 Of scribes ingraved or living, or of both,  
     In Tempest or the cave of Quietude?  
 What pots or poets are these? What meaning loth?  
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to keep time?  
 What's Truthful in a frozen pulchritude?

Our complacent sense of the appropriateness of our own critical enquiry into the poem, our own 'reaching after fact & reason'<sup>23</sup>, is surely implicated in the patent *inappropriateness* of what Geoffrey Hartman has called the 'crescendoing questions' that the speaker as 'explainer-ravisher' addresses to the urn, 'until its mystery is in danger of being dissolved, its form broken for the sake of a

21 *The Description of Greece by Pausanias*, [trans. Taylor], in 3 vols (London, 1794), I, 68 (Book I, chapter 24).

22 The two quotations from the first line here represent the punctuation in transcripts of the *Ode* and in the earlier version published in the *Annals of the Fine Arts* XV (January 1820) respectively.

23 Stigmatized by Keats, when preferring 'Negative Capability', as an 'irritable' compulsion; see the letter to George and Tom Keats, 21, [27] December 1817, *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Gittings, p. 43.

message'?<sup>24</sup> Neither the speaker nor the personified *Ode* is, after all, any more conscious, any more responsive than the figures on the urn to obstinate questioning.

Not that the simple restitution of 'John Keats' as an intending, determining subject is the answer. It might avoid a few such glaring solecisms as poems that think and choose their own rhyme scheme but it will not solve the problems of the meaning, status, and function of art raised by the *Ode*. Whether or not Keats would have been qualified *in theory* to answer the questions we ask of the *Ode* is not for the moment the issue; the fact is that he is not available. Keats is dead and to his own 'high requiem become a sod'. To resurrect him in order to authorize a critical reading is merely to substitute the critical fiction of a live Keats for the critical fiction of a live poem or a live Keatsian persona.

I will return to this, however. What at this stage needs to be stressed is that the simulated *anagnorisis* or 'discovery' by the speaker of the inappropriateness of his own responses is not only the major strategy in the systematic dis-illusionment enacted by the poem, but is also the major strategy in a dis-illusionment essayed on the poem's reader. The same speaker who improperly succumbs to the illusion of the physical presence of the figures on the urn, momentarily 'feeling' them to be responsive to sympathy and exhortation, is himself an overwrought 'figure' of our own readerly imaginations. If not, like the 'marble men and maidens' that figure on the urn, directly addressed, the speaker that figures in the poem is frequently discussed as alive and capable of active discrimination — a (mis)reading of the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* that mirrors his (mis)reading of the Grecian urn. More than any of Keats's other Odes, the *Grecian Urn* is a critical study in *Rezeptionsästhetik*, for which reason it is interesting to observe how adequate a description of the speaker's 'oscillations' is offered by Wolfgang Iser's generic account of 'the reading process':

<sup>24</sup> *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (Chicago and London, 1975), p. 102.

As the formation of illusions is constantly accompanied by 'alien associations' which cannot be made consistent with the illusions, the reader constantly has to lift the restrictions he places on the 'meaning' of the text. Since it is he who builds the illusions, he oscillates between involvement in and observation of those illusions.<sup>25</sup>

The *Ode* offers lessons in how (not) to read Grecian urns that become lessons in how (not) to read odes — on Grecian urns, amongst other things.

#### IV

Indeed, it is with readers' negotiations with art that the *Ode* is primarily, if not always directly, concerned. Assuming a more comprehensive perspective than the one offered by the speaker 'involves the reading mind in a confrontation with and refinement of its own intentions and ambitions', to quote David Simpson again<sup>26</sup>. More than this, however — or, rather, in order to achieve this — the reading mind has to recognize its implication in the narrower perspective and confront its own limitations and potential for error.

Our resistance to this implication of our own critical activity with that of the speaker's is encouraged by — amongst other things — the differences, variously stressed by the speaker, between the respective media of the poetic and plastic arts. The success of the *Ode* as an essay in the reception and function of art therefore in part depends upon our recognizing, beyond the apparent dissimilarities, the significant similarities that obtain between the 'silent' mode of sculpture on the one hand and, on the other, the 'vocal' mode of poetry that strains to give the urn a voice. Just as the reader's must be seen to mirror the speaker's critical activity, so the poem, speculating on the Grecian urn, must be seen to speculate or mirror it — a reflexive relationship suggested by

25 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', reprinted in David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (London and New York, 1988), pp. 211-28 (p. 221).

26 *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry*, p. 8.

such puns as 'express' (l. 3) and 'legend' (l. 5)<sup>27</sup>, 'attitude' (l. 41) and 'overwrought' (l. 42), in the first and last stanzas.

The peculiar fixity of the urn in space is a case in point, and one accentuated by the apparent contrast with the poem's 'fluidity' or unfolding in and through time. On 'reflection', that fixity can be seen instead as a trait that, far from distinguishing, actually identifies the two art objects. Though constituted by a temporal grammar, poems and their garrulous personae exist within a space and/or set of spatial relations as fixed as that of the urn; the vitality or 'presence' of a lyric voice that immediately (unmediatedly) and spontaneously registers changes in perception and consciousness is in fact only an illusion. 'We witness the text's rhetoric tending to violate the urn's silent alterity', writes Martin Aske<sup>28</sup>. Which is true — but only until we realize that the text's rhetoric, as written or printed word, is no more 'noisy' or forthcoming than a Grecian urn: no more or less obdurate; no more or less a 'silent form' (l. 44).

Nor is there any more movement through time for the character in a printed poem than there is movement through space or in(to) time for the figures on the urn. We collaborate to create the movement by reading it that way — under authorial persuasion rather than authorial prescription. Moreover, the temporal succession of word, phrase, sentence, and stanza of even a single reading of a poem should not be confused with our apprehension of its meaning(s) which, even without the poem's elaborate visual (concrete), phonological, and imagistic *patterns*, is as much structural as sequential.

Conversely, any pictorial object, especially one with an urn's 360° surface, can only be apprehended through time — turning the urn *or* page remains a prerogative of the

27 For an extended discussion of the significance of the word 'legend', see David Pollard, *The Poetry of Keats: Language and Experience* (Sussex and New Jersey, 1984), p. 77.

28 *Keats and Hellenism: An Essay* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 115.

'reader' — and thus will be at least partly narrativized, a tendency in fact represented by the speaker's dramatized consciousness in the *Ode* itself, which 'discovers that there is a rhythm of engagement and disengagement by which the mind imposes its own temporality on the stasis of visual art'<sup>29</sup>. Both are static and inert artifacts temporalized and animated by imaginative apprehension.

In the discovery of the urn's illusion that we witness, in other words, we witness simultaneously the poem's illusion of that discovery. The more significant, genuine discovery of the poem is rather this shared identity; the discovery — to put it another way — that the speaker's questionable exaltation of plastic over poetic art in the first two stanzas and his concomitant desire 'to *write* a Grecian urn' is based, not on 'false modesty', but on a false distinction<sup>30</sup>. Though both are conventionally celebrated as 'immortal' and 'immortalizing', both are in fact lifeless and inert: 'even as all objects *as* objects are essentially fixed and dead'<sup>31</sup>.

## V

So much depends upon the nature of the critical attention given to the *viva voce* of the lyric which, being so close to the ubiquitous and irrepressible mediation of human consciousness, is the most seductive of all artistic illusions. We have no trouble acknowledging that the figures on the urn 'live' only the life imparted to them — or imposed upon

<sup>29</sup> Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1983), p. 126.

<sup>30</sup> ' . . . the museumgoer of this ode is guilty of an initial false modesty in pretending that the urn is wiser than he is' — Fry, *The Poet's Calling in the English Ode*, which ends as do most accounts, by celebrating the superiority of poetry (p. 251). (For the desire 'to write' an urn, see John Jones, *John Keats's Dream of Truth* (London, 1969), p. 220.)

<sup>31</sup> To quote from Coleridge's definitions of creativity in the thirteenth chapter of the *Biographia Literaria*, ed. Engell and Bate, I, 304.

them, rather — by the speaker; their lifeless indifference is openly confirmed by his renunciation and almost petulant withdrawal. And yet the authenticity of the speaker's own voice, or of the speaker as voice, though it is no less a fiction than the figures he would animate, has been more or less naively taken for granted in critical commentary, even often loosely identified as 'Keats' (a misrepresentation that the recent criticism I discussed earlier has been only too determined to avoid). The speaker, that is, is 'brought to life' without due recognition of those distinctions between life and art whose reluctant, painful recognition is represented in the *Ode* itself.

The following annotations in Miriam Allott's Longman edition, for example, betray precisely the confusion of fact and fiction from which the speaker is seen to recover:

15-20. As K. realizes that the figures are frozen into immobility the ambival[er]nce of his feelings begins to make itself felt. . . .

21-30. The repetitions . . . suggest the urgency with which K. attempts to subdue the ambivalent feelings first apparent in ll. 15-20 above. . . .

29. *high-sorrowful*] One of the best known of K.'s many compounds formed with the word 'high'.<sup>32</sup>

(Will the real Keats please raise the warm scribe, his hand?) Of a poem that has proved impossible to discuss without reference to its pervasive ironies, this blithe attribution to the speaker of a passion and an activity denied to the figures on the urn is the overriding and frequently overridden irony, an irony surely eloquent about the anxieties and aspirations that inform the confusion of life and art about which the poem itself has so much to say.

Keats wrote to his brother and sister-in-law in the weeks leading up to the composition of the *Ode* that 'they are very shallow people who take every thing literal' (in the strict

<sup>32</sup> *The Poems of John Keats* (London, 1970), pp. 535-6.

sense of according to the 'letter' or word). The comment actually comes immediately prior to the far better known meditation on a 'Man's life of any worth' as 'a continual allegory':

very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life — a life like the scriptures, figurative — which such people can no more make out than they can the hebrew Bible. Lord Byron cuts a figure — but he is not figurative — Shakespeare led a life of Allegory; his works are the comments on it.

The context out of which this meditation grew was a discussion of the ironic or hypocritical gap between profession and practice in Benjamin Bailey's behaviour towards women, and of the tendency of the infatuated Reynoldses — 'Mother and Daughters' — to take him *at his word*. (For the 'pagan' or agnostic Keats, it was no doubt significant that Bailey 'used to woo [Marian Reynolds] with the Bible and Jeremy Taylor under his arm'.)<sup>33</sup> The context of the meditation, in other words, is gossip concerned with the use of speech as evidence of a person's intentions and/or motives — gossip concerned with personality and personae, that is — and it includes reflections on the way in which personal motives inspire misinterpretation. The literary comparison into which the gossip modulates is in fact another expression of Keats's preference for 'Negative capability' over the 'egotistical' mode. Byron's inferiority to Shakespeare is accounted for in his being a *poseur* and marketing an 'attitude' — to 'cut a figure', because of its origins in fashionable dress, also has strong class associations ('a cut above') — rather than rendering experience through a number of refractive, exploratory figures or attitudes.

The speaker 'misreads' the urn by taking the figures or the figurative too literally; correspondingly, that reader misreads the *Ode* who takes the figure of the speaker too literally — especially that reader who takes him as 'Keats', Keats's life 'being a continued Allegory, or darke conceit'

<sup>33</sup> See the letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 14 February - 3 May 1819, *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Gittings, pp. 217-8.

and 'thus cloudily enwrapped in Allegorical deuises' and Keats's poetry but an oblique comment upon it.<sup>34</sup> By exposing the illusive sense of live(li)ness in both the urn and, by implication, the poem, Keats further exposes the illusion of life — of the speaking, exhorting, seeking voice — so characteristic of the Romantic lyric and so potentially seductive of the self-cheating Fancy of the reader.

Moreover, just as the *Ode*, on the contrary, adverts to its own status as a simulacrum, so does it advert *via* the urn to its own status as a cultural product. This is especially true of the fourth stanza which stresses, besides origins and ends (conflated in the 'green altar') and the re-presentational limits of art, the 'mysterious' otherness of a culture which aestheticizes brutality. Again, to quote Martin Aske: 'The whole poem moves towards a recognition of the irreversible alterity of Greece, the inhumanity and (in)difference of the past'<sup>35</sup>. Which, again, is true — but, again, only so far as to function paradigmatically. Keats wrote out of a sense of his own and his poem's comparably 'irreversible [cultural] alterity' for a future reader; a sense of his own poem as no less a product of contemporary cultural and intellectual exigencies than the urn is a product of antiquity — or *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost* products of their respective periods, for that matter. 'What is then to be inferr'd?':

O many things—It proves there is really a grand march of the intellect—,It proves that a mighty providence subdues the mightiest Minds to the service of the time being, whether it be in human Knowledge or Religion.<sup>36</sup>

34 Like Keats's own meditation, this quotation derives from Spenser's letter to Raleigh 'expounding his whole intention in the course of this worke' *The Faerie Queene*; see the edition by A. C. Hamilton for Longman (London and New York, 1977), p. 737.

35 *Keats and Hellenism*, p. 119.

36 Keats to J. H. Reynolds, 3 May 1818; *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Gittings, p. 96.

## VI

John Keats wrote (past tense) a poem entitled *Ode on a Grecian Urn* which draws attention (present tense) to his own absence; to the fact that, though he is 'behind the whole artifact', historically the artifact has been left behind him and he has been left behind or superseded by the artifact. The paradox of the permanent impermanence of art that is signalled by the speaker's naive, self-interested 'misreading' of the predicament of the figures on the urn resurfaces, though far less obtrusively, in line 46:

When old age shall this generation waste . . .

The drama of the emotional oscillation of the speaker between identification and disengagement represents an awkward, *literal* imagination caught between two extremes: seeing the figures on the urn wholly from within, as it were, and seeing them wholly from without. In line 46 we read the reader of the urn — whose identity here is less important than the fact of his being contemporary with the original production of the *Ode* — from two similar perspectives. Reading from 'within' the poem, we identify with a voice in the present anticipating its own death in the future. Reading from without, on the other hand, we read from that future: 'this generation' has become *that* generation, and what is now 'this generation' (our own) can expect, after its own 'old age' and 'waste', to become *that* generation to a future generation calling itself 'this generation' — and so on, as 'generation' struggles unsuccessfully to contain its opposite or *degeneration*.

I do not mean to imply in all this that the *Ode* challenges us to choose between the extremes of delusion and cold detachment — of silliness and chilliness, as it were — alternately occupied by the speaker. His is a negative example; what is intimated is the combination of participation and attention of a middle state, in which a controlled surrender to artistic illusion or 'willing suspension of disbelief' can be maintained without confusion. I doubt that 'we cannot, strictly speaking, watch ourselves having an

illusion', as E. H. Gombrich has argued<sup>37</sup>; surely we can and do preserve an instinctive sense or inobtrusive consciousness of our participation in artistic illusion, and without any of that tension that obliged the speaker in the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* to choose between delusion and 'disbelief'.

As both illusion and dis-illusioning product or artifact, the poem can be a 'friend to man', enlightening and consoling. Betrothed as it is to an alien 'quietness' and not to man, what it can never be is the 'bride' to cleave to that, as an apparition of vitality, it purports to be. That while physically intact it could remain a 'friend to man' at all is another paradox of the poem: the paradox of a cold friendship that, while enlightening and consoling, cannot obliterate the anxiety and isolation of independent agency and intellectual, affective individuality (the Self, if not the 'sole Self' of the *Ode to a Nightingale*). But this truth or 'reality principle' is part of the specific consolation offered by the poem. Of the 'beautiful truths' communicated by the work of art to each passing generation, in other words, one of the more significant is that it is itself *only* a work of art, and therefore a beautiful lie:

we know how to tell many lies that resemble the truth,  
but we know also how to tell the truth when we wish  
(Hesiod, *Theogony*, 26-7)<sup>38</sup>

Just as 'all Cretans', so all works of art are liars, and the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, for all the *angst* of its verbal activity and for all its argumentative 'immediacy', is no exception. Out of the 'lie' of the single-tense, eternal present of art may come intimations of the 'truth' of time and mortality for each (de)generation; out of the 'lie' of its serene immobility, messages of 'going hence' and of 'coming hither'. And out of both (presumably) may come, along with an

<sup>37</sup> *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, fifth edn (Oxford, 1977), p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Trans. D. A. Russell, in his and M. Winterbottom's *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in New Translations* (Oxford, 1972), p. 3.

understanding of that existential journey, much of its pleasure.

In recent years, Romanticists have rediscovered Keats's discovery of the Romantic lyric as a frozen product, rather than a living process; as an artifact, rather than as an unmediated transcription of the poet's consciousness spontaneously evolving in and through time<sup>39</sup>. Romantic 'sincerity' and 'authenticity' are now identified as rhetorical tropes, not to say subterfuges. In his influential *Romantic Ideology*, for example, Jerome McGann wrote of the 'play or development of ideas' in the Romantic poem and 'the movement of consciousness in its search for what it does not know that it knows' as a mock-search for what it pretends not to know that it knows, designed to perpetrate the illusion of the 'true voice of feeling'<sup>40</sup> for reasons that are ideologically suspect<sup>41</sup>. So wrote Keats, in his influential *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

## VII

Other recent critics, in their turn, have 'rediscovered' in Keats's poetry a self-sufficient artifice or 'stationing' quite uncharacteristic of the lyrics of his contemporaries:

Keats's poems tend rather to distinguish than to identify narrator (or lyric "I") and writer. Rarely do we hear his voice as the utterance of an unmediated human voice. . . one must remember that an anonymous working brain is continuously engendering and overhearing

writes Marjorie Levinson. Again: 'The framing devices of Keats's poetry do not, like Wordsworth's preemptive

39 Helen Vendler stunningly understates the case thus: 'It is perhaps misguided . . . to think of Keats as a helpless spirit to whom poems happened'; *The Odes of John Keats*, p. 138.

40 Keats to J. H. Reynolds, 21 September 1819; *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Gittings, p. 292.

41 *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago and London, 1983), p. 63.

techniques, usher us into the poem, they frame us out'<sup>42</sup>. All expression is variously metaphorical, of course, but how far 'into' any poem or work of art can we be ushered? When the speaker in the *Ode* sought entry 'into' the paradise he had projected on to the urn he found only unaccommodating, cold clay. And it is surely no coincidence that Levinson should have chosen the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* to exemplify Keats's want of Romantic 'hospitality' towards the reader. Of all the Odes it is the most carefully 'shaped' or 'patterned' — by more regular stanzas, for example, and carefully framed vignettes<sup>43</sup>; by the repetition of words and syntax; by chiasmic figures both of speech ('Attic shape, fair attitude' and 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' are the obvious examples) and of thought. The very *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia* I am suggesting, for example, in which the poem and its reader become implicated in the drama of the urn and its beholder, involves a conceptual chiasmus in which the urn and poem become, respectively, a mirror image of each other: identical in reverse. The poem might have come 'as naturally as the Leaves to a tree'<sup>44</sup>, but *what* in fact came more closely resembled the 'leaf-fring'd legend' on a Grecian urn.

Nor is it a coincidence that Levinson should have focussed on 'the final, bracketed epigram', arguing that it 'puts the entire poem and all its apparently human and authorial anguish in aesthetic space: museum space to be precise'<sup>45</sup>. Thus with an irony implicating readers at every level of fictionality and consciousness, Levinson discovers Keats's poetry to be, in spite of what she calls its 'subject-related writing', a 'cold pastoral'; her implied object — to dis-

42 *Keats's Life of Allegory*, pp. 20-21.

43 For a detailed analysis of the structure and structural repetition of the poem, see Vendler's extended discussion of the *Ode* in her *The Odes of John Keats*, pp. 116-152.

44 For this (in)famous 'axiom', see the letter to John Taylor, 27 February 1818; *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Gittings, p. 70.

45 *Keats's Life of Allegory*, p. 20.

illusion the reader of Keats's poetry by stressing its resistant otherness — turns out to be none other than Keats's own.

There are significant differences, however. Beyond the fact that the characteristic artifice of Keats's poetry stressed by recent criticism can be found mooted or meditated in the *Ode* itself, not only was the recognition of unmediated utterance as a fond illusion an ethical and therapeutic imperative for Keats, but it need not involve either the framing out or expulsion of the reader. While ruling out the unity (and/or appropriation) symbolized by marriage and the genetic or blood relationship of family, the metaphor of friendship allows for partial identification and rich rewards.

### VIII

Distinctions of tense throughout the critical discussion of a poet so mortally self-conscious as Keats are crucial. Keats does not *make* a discovery, for example; he *made* it. Keats is dead and confined, as the urn and the poem are confined, within 'museum space' (literally, if one thinks of the Keats Museum at Hampstead). Levinson's persistence in using the present tense while arguing for Keats's (non)involvement in the poem — and this in spite of her recognition of the distinction obtaining between the 'narrator (or lyric "I") and writer' — ignores this fact of his quite literal non-involvement; of his being dead, that is. The only 'working brain . . . continuously engendering and overhearing' is the live reader's, 'in midst of other woe' than Keats's. In this one sense at least — though it is an important one — we are better qualified to read the poem than Keats's contemporaries, being in a better position to appreciate the analogy between a dead sculptor and his urn and a dead poet and his poem. Keats's being dead carries the poem's convictions from the conditional into reality, as I suggested earlier, and thus gives extra force to the simulated discovery in the poem.

To suggest the complexity of the meditation on art and mortality I want to expand on the expression 'impassioned

clay' from Keats's sonnet 'On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again' (l. 6), using it as a kind of metaphysical conceit for the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. For one thing, 'impassioned clay' is exactly what the figures on the urn are — and are not. Passionless *per se*, that is, they are impassioned by the speaker. Nor need we not stop here, for equally they can be said to express their maker's passion. Our preoccupation with Keats's using Adam's self-fulfilling dream-prophecy of the creation of Eve as a symbol for the creative Imagination should not blind us to the older critical commonplace of the analogy between poetic and divine creativity, the Old Testament account of the Creation involving as it does the in-spiration of Adam, or 'clay'. (The other myth of 'impassioned clay', and the one most often recalled in discussions of the *Ode*, is the Classical myth of Pygmalion.)

If it was Adam/clay that God brought to life, it was also Adam who, with the Eve of his prophetic dream, 'brought death into the world'<sup>46</sup>. In its origins or originating, art/Imagination conspires at once with life and death. As generic 'artist', the sculptor would give life to clay figures as God had given life to a clay figure. 'The remains' of the dead sculptor's once warm passion, however, can be found on (and in?<sup>47</sup>) the 'cold pastoral' of the urn. Just so the poem itself metaphorically 'contains', within the simulated passion of an eternally present speaker, the ashes of the once warm passion of its now dead poet, John Keats.

The paradox of 'impassioned clay' — of the human and of human values enshrined in an alien, inhuman object — does not stop at the work of art, however. The dramatized

46 *Paradise Lost*, I, 3.

47 In her discussion of the *Ode* in *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism* (Ithaca and London, 1980), Tilottama Rajan has made as much as any commentator of the urn as funereal, though by identifying the speaker as Keats — 'at the crucial moment he draws back from excavating too deeply in the archeology of the idealizing consciousness' (p. 135) — she is forced to read the poem as disingenuously side-stepping its own intimations of mortality.

discovery that art is not life involves not only an achieved understanding of what art is and is not, can and cannot do, but also an understanding of what life is and is not. This brings us to that apperception also dramatized in the poem, in which the apprehension of and response to (in this case) art induces a consciousness of the nature of one's own existence:

the consciousness  
Of whom [we] are, habitually infused  
Through every image, and through every thought,  
And all impressions.

*The Prelude* (1805), XIII, 108-111

In the *Ode* that apperception recuperates, in another ironic reversal, the Biblical myth of human 'being' as 'impassioned clay'; as clay that takes on breath and emotion only to relinquish it in death. Is it not this intimation of mortality, with its inexplicable shifts from nonbeing into being and back again, that the speaker 'knows' through his experience of art's lifeless liveliness, of the uncertain certainty of origins and ends in a 'green altar' (l. 32), and of the invoked 'ghost town' from which

not a soul to tell  
Why thou art desolate can e'er return

(ll. 39-40)

like Hamlet's 'undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns'?<sup>48</sup> Is it not this 'dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity'?

All this is a part of what the urn/poem 'say'st' and thus of what we, 'on earth', will 'know' (l. 50) — about our use and abuse of, and attitude to art; about ourselves — if we are open to the analogy between the speaker's and our own respective struggles to read Grecian urns. What we 'know on

<sup>48</sup> *Hamlet*, III, i, 79-80; Helen Vendler suggested this allusion in a lecture given at the University of Illinois in 1979; see Leon Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of the Imagination* (Urbana and Chicago, 1985), p. 141 n. 27.

earth' in fact neither is nor can be contained by an epigram that would limit both the expressive and discursive potential of a work of art and the understanding of its audience. But what the urn says to us, directly, is by no means the sum total of what we can learn from it, or of what we can learn from the *Ode* on it. Beyond confirming an unexceptionable preference for an engaged over an escapist art, the vexing final lines offer 'knowledge of the dissembling and opaque sort generally associated with oracles'<sup>49</sup>: a calculated ambiguity delivering a different message to different suppliants, according to respective needs. The onus, in short, was and is upon the reader.

<sup>49</sup> George B. Walsh, *The Varieties of Enchantment: Early Greek Views of the Nature and Function of Poetry* (Chapel Hill and London, 1984), p. 27.