Art, Beauty, and Truth in Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

Bruce King (from Poetry for Students, 1997)

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" was written in May of 1819 when Keats was 23 years old and his life was in emotional turmoil. In the previous six months his brother Tom had died, and he had met and fallen in love with Fanny Brawne who, at the time the poem was written, lived next door to him in Hamstead. It was a period of intense creativity during which Keats wrote his great odes; in them, he explored his emotions by addressing, describing and questioning some idea or symbol that he celebrated. Keats's odes are a form of meditative poetry. In meditation, a person thinks intensely upon and draws conclusions from a subject. The subject may be imagined in detail as if it were actually present. During a time when ancient Greece was being rediscovered through archeological excavations and travel, as well as in books and exhibitions of Greek cultural artifacts, Keats projected his concerns about living fully, love, art, religion, death and eternity upon a Grecian urn.

Because the urn Keats describes has been shown by scholars including Claude Lee Finney to be a composite of details from various sources, the poem is a commentary upon an imagined work of art. By writing an ode, originally a Greek poetic form, Keats is making his own claim to permanence. The "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is Keats's own "silent form" meant to perform a similar function"tease us out of thought" -as that of the original Greek urn, that, ironically, does not exist (unlike Keats's poem about it).

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" concludes with the urn saying "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," and the poet commenting "-that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." In themselves, such statements are close to nonsense. Truth and beauty belong to radically different realms, and there is nothing especially true about, say, a beautiful automobile or dog. We can test a scientific truth, but there is little to make us agree about the beauty of a car or animal. We say beauty is in the eye of beholder. Keats is using paradoxical language to make a claim for an alternative kind of truth. This claim makes sense within the logic of the poem, but it is also meant to have a wider application to how we view reality. The poem makes claims about the value and uses of art (and poetry) as represented by the urn, in contrast to other kinds of truth. These other kinds of truth might be scientific, religious, or philosophical, but the poem says clearly that "on earth" we can not know anything more true than what we will learn from art and that such knowledge is sufficient. There might be other forms of knowledge after death or in some "other" realm, but they do not concern us and we are unlikely to know much about them while "on earth."

These are large claims for art, but what has been claimed? Stanza five says the urn "dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity." 'Tease," with its variety of meanings ranging from tempt to mock, suggests that, like thinking about eternity, the seductiveness of the topic and impossibility of coming to any conclusion mean we shouldn't worry about it. The urn itself, however, has its own kind of eternity. It remains after "old age shall this generation waste." A concern of the poem then is aging, the passing of time, and death. "Waste" is a powerful word

made even more powerful by being in rhyme position at the end of a line and being the last word of an introductory clause. The basic meaning of waste is consume, finish, or use up, but the range extends from ruin to turn into refuse or trash. Our lives not only pass, but at the end we become waste. The urn, however, remains-a work of art that speaks to others "in midst of other woe." As each life and generation suffers from pain and fears, the urn is "a friend to man" by offering its religion of art, its own kind of truth, and its own permanent portrait of human desires and activities.

We might say that the poem shows how in the nineteenth century some people were losing faith in Christian revelation. These people had become agnostic toward any "truth" and were seeking in art a substitute for the comforts of religion. It is significant that the work of art that offers such comfort is a painted Grecian urn. The vase (like a poem) has a shape or form, and it has a narrative (like a poem) that needs interpretation. The end result is the knowledge that art gives permanence to our feelings and desires. That the subject is a Grecian urn might well remind us that the early nineteenth century was a time of archeology, the collecting of the past, the rediscovering of Greece and the Mediterranean, and the high evaluation of Greece, along with Egypt, Rome and Israel as the origins of Western civilization.

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" is itself a well-formed work of art. It consists of five rhymed stanzas; each stanza has ten lines, and each line consists of ten syllables, usually of iambic pentameter. The feel of the rhythm is established in the first line: Thou still / unrav / ish'd bride / of qui / etness. The unusual stanzaic form seems to be derived from the structure of the sonnet that Keats had used earlier in such poems as "When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be." Instead of fourteen lines divided into a octave of two quatrains and a sestet of two tercets, each stanza of the ode consists of one quatrain of alternate rhymes *(abab)* and two tercets, printed as a single stanza. This speeds up the move ment, in comparison to the sonnet, from the exposition of theme during the quatrain of each stanza to its exploration and development in the tercets. The quatrain is balanced by the tercets, the first of which introduces rhymes *cde* followed by a tercet that closes the *cde* rhymes in an unpredictable order. The structure can be seen clearly in stanza one where the quatrain concludes with the idea that the urn expresses "A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:", a statement clearly concluded by a full colon. This is followed by two tercets beginning "What leaf-fring'd" and "What men," in which "what" is used as a short refrain. The tercets here describe what is depicted on the vase. If Keats wanted structural contrasts, he also wanted the stanza to have unity and to flow without the thought and rhythm being halted-except at the end of stanzas where the space between stanzas allows for the next stanza to start on a new note. Within each stanza, excitement builds up as certain words or phrases are repeated and develop an accumulative force.

The following stanzas are less obviously divided into contrasting sections, but stanza two has a colon after the quatrain, stanza three a semicolon, and stanza four a question mark. Artists work within, against, or adapt previous artistic conventions, forms and styles. English poets have often tried to find some equivalent of the mixture of passion, seeming freedom, and control found in the :lassical Greek ode. Keats's stanzas may be read as single sentences, with

various clauses, exclamations and interjections, and the entire poem may be read as five sentences.

In the first stanza, Keats addresses the silent urn and asks it the significance of its decorations. In the second stanza, Keats addresses the decorations; their actions remain incomplete but, unlike those of flesh and blood, are permanent. The third stanza celebrates such permanence as a continual time of youth, strength, enjoyment, passion, happiness and love, unlike the unfulfilled and passing desires and pleasures of the flesh. The center of the poem brings to a climax this celebration of an idealized life: "More happy love! more happy, happy love! / For ever panting, and for ever young." An unusual intensity is created by the repetition of such words as "more," "happy," and "for ever" and by the suggestion of a continuing activity in "piping," 'panting," "Breathing," "burning," and even 'parching." There is a change in mood in stanza Four, as the past is found to include disturbingly strange rituals, blood sacrifices, and ways of life we do not understand. The town is desolate in be ing empty, but it also seems dismally silent after the activity and joys of the previous stanzas. Keats does not indicate what we are think of this, but our thoughts might range from interest in other customs, frustration at not knowing more, to feeling that the past is no more a source of constant pleasure than the present.

No reading of a poem is complete; there is always something more to be said. Because the appreciation of beauty is subjective (in the eyes of the beholder) and shaped by conventions (what others teach us to recognize as beautiful), the criticism of works of art changes as a result of kinds of awareness, information, or assumptions. There is an old problem about the concluding two lines. Does the urn speak the two lines or, as is usually accepted, only 'Truth is Beauty, beauty truth." If the urn also said "that is all / Ye know on earth, all ye need to know," it would not necessarily mean the poet agreed with what the urn said. Indeed, he could be ironic in giving the urn such a limited vision in which the only truth was artistic beauty. In his book *John Keats,* Walter Jackson Bate claims that the final two lines are similar to inscriptions addressed to passersby on Greek monuments.

While the ode celebrates the survival of the past it may also remind us of the limitations of the aesthetic in contrast to actual sensual experience. Many critics see the poem as filled with ironies (suggesting the opposite of what is said). How can Keats or the urn so praise beauty when desire on the urn is unsatisfied by sexual pleasure and when the world it depicts reminds us of death and destruction. Moreover the language of the poem seems excessive: "Ah, happy, happy boughs!.... More happy love! more happy, happy love!" If Keats indicates a distance between the serene, silent beauty of art and the pains, anguish, passions, and pleasures of the world in which we live, are the former necessarily superior as thinking about the art on the urn might at first suggest? As we read with more sensitivity and with more familiarity, we wonder whether Keats might possibly be suggesting that his poetry is superior to the urn which, remember, is also a product of his own imagination.

Opinion has surprisingly varied among critics concerning "Ode on A Grecian Urn." T. S. Eliot, Allen Tate, and others have argued that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" does not make sense.

John Keats: Odes, edited by G.S. Fraser, offers a useful, brief introduction concerning the place of this poem among Keats's other odes and addresses problems of interpretation. One problem concerns who says what in the final two lines. Critics now usually agree that the 1820 version of the poem is correct; here the urn only says "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," and the rest of the two lines is Keats's commentary. Does Keats agree with the urn, or might he be ironically implying a limitation to the urn's vision of the world? Is it enough to turn the acts and passions of life into permanence through art? Is it enough that "she can not fade, though thou hast not thy bliss"? Even the "still unravish' d bride of quietness" in line one raises questions. Might it eventually be ravished, might Keats's poem about it be a kind of ravishing of quietness and silence?

Source: Bruce King, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 1997.