JAMES BOOTH

Keats: 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'

I

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
  Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
  A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
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?

II

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
  Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
  Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
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,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
  She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
    For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

III

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
  Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
  For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
  For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
    For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
  That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
    A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

IV

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?
What little town by river or sea shore,
  Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
  Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
  Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
    Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

V

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

KEATS wrote the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' in May 1819 probably immediately after the 'Ode to a Nightingale'. At this time he was staying with his friend Brown in Hampstead and living next door to Fanny Brawne to whom he was becoming deeply attached. Despite financial worries, particularly over his elder brother George and his family in Canada, and despite the complexity of his feelings for Fanny, this was a period of relative order and stability in Keats's life. His younger brother Tom had finally died of consumption the previous December, and it was not until the following February that he himself began to cough blood and realised that he was mortally ill with the same disease. But in May 1819 in his 24th year Keats was at the height of his new found youthful powers.

The central theme which preoccupied him in his poetry during this period was the painful contrast between the beauty of the world and its transience and imperfection. The sources of this preoccupation were various. The death of his brother had made him particularly conscious of disease and suffering, and marginal notes made at this time in his copy of Burton's

Anatomy of Melancholy in which he contrasts 'goatish, winnyish lustful love' with 'the abstract adoration of the deity', point to a sexual form of this problem. However in his poetic treatments of this theme Keats always elevates it to a universal level beyond such biographical 'explanations'. Typically his poems attempt to transcend the disease, ugliness and transience of life by recreating moments of intense ecstasy achieved in the contemplation of the beauty of Nature (for example the nightingale's song) or of Art (for example the urn). Keats may justly be described then as an escapist poet. The positive value after which he strives is an essentially short-lived and even an illusory one. On the other hand Keats seldom seeks to deceive us as to the incompleteness of the escapes from 'the weariness, the fever and the fret' which he explores. Characteristically, as in *Lamia* and the two great odes, the poet shows his awareness that the escape is imperfect and at the end of the poem brings the reader firmly if reluctantly back to the real world of pain and death. In this Keats shows the common-sense side of his nature, amply revealed in his letters and remarked on by his friends. When he does attempt to claim a real metaphysical permanence for these momentary glimpses of perfection he writes mere rhetoric instead of poetry, the most resounding example of this being the fervent and rather absurd opening of his early poem *Endymion*.

> A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
> Its loveliness increases; it will never
> Pass into nothingness . . .

In the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' Keats shows himself aware of the hollowness of such large claims.

The urn of which Keats writes seems to have been an ideal creation of his own. Details are taken from various vases which he had seen in the British Museum or illustrated in books. And the heifer 'lowing at the skies' is probably borrowed from the Elgin marbles for which Keats expressed limitless admiration. The composite vase described in the poem then may be taken to represent the whole Romantic ideal of 'classical' art rather than any specific example of it. The escape which Keats is exploring in this poem is into the world of 'classical' beauty, a world of balanced and harmonious aesthetic perfection, coolly aloof from the world of decay and death.

The poem opens in a tone of reverential solemnity. But in reading we must not allow the exalted tone of the words to obscure the complex ambiguity of their metaphorical implications. Even in these first lines there are hints at an ominous frigidity in the urn's 'classical' perfection, hints which are later to develop into the central tension of the poem. The phrase 'Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness' suggests that the urn, like a virgin before marriage, possesses its purity only at the cost of a certain incompleteness and holding back from involvement or fruition. The ambiguity of the word 'still' contributes to this uneasy effect. Its primary meaning is adverbial, 'as yet'. But the slow and sonorous way in which the phrase demands to be read helps to lend it the force of an adjective, 'immobile' or 'impassive'. Another adverbial connotation, 'for ever' hovers in the background, suggesting an eternal frigid detachment from life. Furthermore the fruition or marriage for which the bride is destined is itself ironic. Quietness seems to be viewed as much as a ravisher as a bridegroom. And when we consider the metaphor more closely we see that the marriage of the urn to quietness will in fact be consummated only by its literal 'ravishment' or destruction. Only when it is shattered will the urn and its wordless message of comfort to Man be completely at one with quietness.

The metaphors in the second line have a similarly complex and ambiguous effect. That the urn should be seen as the 'foster-child of silence and slow time' is appropriate, the original begetter of the urn, the potter, being dead. But why should the urn be the 'child' of silence and yet the 'bride' of quietness? Are not silence and quietness almost synonymous terms? Admittedly the extent to which these abstractions are being personified is uncertain. Neither word has a capital letter, the usual indication of a personification in eighteenth century and much nineteenth century verse. But although the personification is muted we may still feel uneasy. There is a

suggestion of unhealthy doubling of relationships and even a sort of incest. This is no doubt taking interpretation a little too far, but such hints are not out of key with the ambiguous and ominous resonances which we have already seen at work beneath the calm and unruffled surface of the first lines.

A more explicit paradox is now introduced in Keats's statement that the urn can express a tale 'thus' (in its quietness) more sweetly than the words of the poet. But although the leaf-fring'd legend is expressed sweetly by the urn it is also expressed incompletely, as the rhetorical questions soon show.

> What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
> What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

However in a typically Romantic way the unintelligibility of the scene, instead of detracting from its effect in Keats's eyes, only serves to increase its mystery and 'sweetness'. Yet another and more fundamental paradox underlies these lines and one which relates to the central antithesis of involvement and detachment. For although the urn is so cool and detached, a 'cold pastoral', Keats's description of the scenes depicted on it is often highly sensuous, sexual or violent, as here. Keats seems to be excited as much by the urn's potential to release his imagination into this wild orgy, (or later into the panting expectation of the lover), as by its classical poise and self-possession. Indeed Keats even exaggerates the sensuous and violent elements of the urn. It seems impossible for instance that the intense physical turmoil he describes here or the later precise sensuous details such as the heifer's 'silken flanks' and the 'trodden weed' of the last stanza could have been so vividly delineated on any actual Greek vase.

This puzzling fact may lead us to consider more closely the exact nature of the escape which the urn offers. The first lines seem to suggest that it is an escape from the flux of physical contingencies into a world of pure detachment, and in the second stanza Keats makes a distinction between the 'sensual' ear and that of the 'spirit'. But if we look closely with our previous doubts in mind we can see that there is really no simple antithesis of sense and spirit in the poem. It is more a contrast between two different modes of sensuality. There is a 'goatish, winnyish lustful' kind which strives after involvement and crude satiation and results in unpleasant physical effects, 'a burning forehead and a parching tongue'. And on the other hand there is a more refined and delicate sensuality which remains detached, content with the exquisite moments of arrested unsatiated desire such as those expressed by the urn. This sensuality stops at 'the abstract adoration of the deity'. But each of these kinds is equally sensual and the words 'spirit' and 'abstract' are somewhat misleading. The ideal escape which Keats explores leads, as his rich and vivid language shows, into a refined sensuality rather than into anything 'spiritual' in the usual sense of that word.

Before moving on to the second stanza something must be said about the poem's overall structure and about the style in which it is written. Keats uses a stanza-form ideally suited to his complex and elusive subject. It is fairly long—ten lines. Each line is an iambic pentameter but this fact is obscured in reading the poem out loud by the *enjambements* which are freely allowed. The rime-scheme is variable. Each stanza begins abab, but after this the rimes interweave in different and complicated ways: cdedce (stanzas I and V), cdeced (Stanza II) and cdecde (stanzas III and IV). The result of the length of the stanza together with the fluidity of metre and rime-scheme is that we do not apprehend each stanza in the simple way that we 'hear' ballad stanzas or heroic couplets, where the ear soon learns to expect the rimes and regular line-lengths. Here the stanzas form a more apparently spontaneous, reflective discourse, and at the same time a more complex and dense one. The reader feels the poem's orderliness but cannot define it without deliberate analysis. It may be significant for the overall shape of the work that the rime-scheme of the first and last stanzas is the same, although a reader could not be expected to hear this as he reads. Perhaps it is not too fanciful to see this as a practical example of an 'unheard melody', a harmony which is present undetec-

ted below the surface.

The rhythms of the individual lines and the closely-worked alliteration and assonance reinforce the densely-woven texture which is created by the stanza form. An example of Keats carefully adjusting the rhythm for musical and expressive effect occurs in the second line where, although the word 'slow' comes on an 'off' beat in the pentameter line and does not receive a metrical accent, it nevertheless carries great stress because of its burden of meaning. Appropriate weight and slowness is thereby given to the phrase 'slow time'. The following line begins with an inverted foot, /x instead of x/.

/ x	x /	x /	
Sylvan	histor	ian who	. . .

This lends greater declamatory force to Keats's address to the urn. But the delicacy and refinement of Keats's craftsmanship is perhaps best seen in his use of alliteration and assonance. The style continually falls into short haunting phrases, often consisting of adjective + noun: 'still unravish'd bride', 'foster-child of silence', 'Sylvan historian', leaf-fring'd legend', 'the dales of Arcady'. In each case the same or related vowels or consonants are played off against each other for the greatest musical and sensuous effect. Adjectives are carefully chosen both for their meaning and their sound. 'Leaf-fring'd' shows a typical Keatsian compound adjective, coined for greater richness and economy of effect. It is difficult to be very precise in talking of such subtle effects and we must fall back on Matthew Arnold's general phrase 'verbal magic' to describe if not to explain this, Keats's most characteristic poetic excellence.

The opening of the second stanza shows clearly the emotional rather than logical manner in which Keats's odes develop and build up their larger structures. The statement 'Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard / Are sweeter' relates back to the scene described in the first stanza. But the connection is oblique and unclear at first, lending the words a stark, vatic quality. The thought of this stanza twists about unexpectedly although the surface remains unruffled. At first the poet appears wholly satisfied with unheard melodies and unambiguously scornful of the sensual ear. But the phrase 'ditties of no tone' strikes a hollow note and the remainder of the stanza takes on a more ambiguous tone. The permanence and perfection of the piper's and lover's situations is seen as a sort of compensation for their unsatisfying lack of movement or fruition. By the end of the stanza the direction of emotion has shifted from the initial resounding assertion and the reader begins to detect an uneasy tension, a slightly 'willed' quality behind the last lines.

> Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
> Though winning near the goal—yet do not grieve;
> She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
> For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

As Cleanth Brooks succinctly remarks 'The beauty portrayed is deathless because it is lifeless.'

In the two following stanzas Keats attempts by different methods to banish such ironic doubts as these and find complete satisfaction in the urn's beauty. In stanza III he uses bold rhetoric in an attempt to carry the reader with him. There is an element of feverish self-persuasion in the ecstatic assertions, detectable in the heady repetition of 'happy'. A degree of conviction is however induced by this technique of frontal assault and the reader does recoil from the vivid realisation of ordinary cloying passion in the last two lines. Stanza IV uses a more subtle technique. In a way characteristic of the rhapsodic ode-form the pace changes abruptly and Keats attempts to recreate in words one of the beautiful scenes on the urn. This is the poetic climax of the poem and calls forth Keats's richest 'verbal magic'. However, despite the beauty of the description the incompleteness of the escape offered by the urn is still suggested by the hanging questions. These are left even more poignantly unanswered by an unexpected shift in the grammatical structure of the stanza.

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

Again, as in the second stanza, a hidden emotional shift has been taking place and these last three lines possess a new wistful and resigned tone that we have not heard before. It is as though the poet cannot preserve the illusion any longer. The price paid for permanence is immobility and a sort of sterility.

But—and here we come to the central affirmation of all Keats's best poetry—some sort of victory over transience and decay *has* taken place. In these lines transience itself is transmuted into one of the modes of beauty. The little town is so beautiful for Keats precisely *because* not a soul to tell why it is desolate can return, just as the violets in the 'Ode to a Nightingale' are beautiful *because* they are fast-fading and covered up in leaves, and just as Autumn in the 'Ode to Autumn' is beautiful *because* it is about to dissolve into Winter. The central tone which unites transience and beauty in this sad conjunction is poignancy, and the poignant holds a particular place in Keats's work and in Romantic poetry as a whole. While most previous generations of poets had asserted their most positive values in large statements about morality, society or religion, the Romantic poets frequently turned for their most intense and satisfying experience of life to intangible and transient moments or states of emotion. In this poem Keats gives one of the most perfect and self-aware accounts of this peculiarly Romantic slant on the world.

In the final stanza the less satisfying aspects of the urn's perfection are explicitly admitted by the poet in such phrases as 'Cold Pastoral' and 'marble men and maidens'. But the escape from 'old age' and other evils of existence offered by the urn is still affirmed to be of comfort to mankind despite its incompleteness. Keats's precise attitude towards the urn's message has been the source of some dispute among critics particularly in relation to the last two resounding lines of the poem. The question centres on the positioning of the inverted commas in the 1820 edition of the work.

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

Such an arrangement suggests that the urn 'says' only the first half-line, and in the rest Keats is presumed, by an awkward twist of syntax, to be addressing his readers and endorsing the urn's words. However critics who are led by this interpretation to view these lines as a profound philosophical statement made by Keats himself, encounter difficulties. The word 'truth' must be racked a thousand ways in an attempt to show its profundity. Graham Hough for instance is driven to say that here 'truth' has a special meaning, 'that which has lasting value'. Surely such interpretation reduces the lines to woolly metaphysics.

Our difficulty here may be clarified by a closer examination of the text and the textual authority for the inverted commas round 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'. In a previous version of the poem printed in *Annals of the Fine Arts* in 1819 there are no inverted commas whatsoever, and there are none in any of the four transcripts made from Keats's lost manuscript. It seems quite reasonable then to assume that Keats did not authorise the inverted commas in the 1820 text and that they were added by the publishing house. It would accord with what we know of Keats's impatient and vigorous mode of composition to leave out such sophistications. If then, as it seems quite natural to do, we attribute the last two lines entirely to the urn, we find that the poem both reads more smoothly and makes more sense. Up until this point Keats has been addressing the urn and it would be a most awkward wrench for him suddenly to turn and address the reader at this point. But more significantly, if the last two lines are attributed solely to the urn we are free to take them as a non-rational statement of the half-articulate perfection which has invested it throughout the poem. We need not attempt to interpret them as a connected philosophical theory put forward by the poet himself. On this reading the urn's final statement to Man is appropriately as tenuous and elusive as its effect on the poet has been throughout the poem. Keats, by detaching himself from the urn's words of comfort, shows that he recognises even if he regrets the provisional nature of the escape which it offers.

Further Reading: F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation*, London, 1936. (Analyses the odes and argues that Keats is 'the great Aesthete—the one Aesthete of genius.') Graham Hough, *The Romantic Poets*, London, 1953. (Traces Keats's poetic development and relates him to the Romantic movement as a whole). Cleanth Brooks, 'Keats's Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes', in *The Well Wrought Urn*, London 1949. (Concentrates on the ironies and paradoxes of the poem.) William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words*, London, 1951. pp. 368-74. (A reply to Brooks reasserting the emotional and personal aspect of the poem.)

ARNOLD P. HINCHLIFFE

Tennyson: 'Ulysses'

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: all times I have enjoy'd
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone; on shore, and when
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!
As tho' to breathe were life. Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains: but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle—
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:
There gloom the dark broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

The twentieth century reader tends to be condescending to a poet like Tennyson: he is too moralistic, he rambles, he ruminates—to borrow T. S. Eliot's crushing verb. G. K. Stead, in *The New Poetic* [1964], illustrates the modern view that Tennyson and his audience joined in a pact to deceive themselves about themselves and their society, and used poetry