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KEATS'S 'ODE ON A GRECIAN URN'

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

THE difficulty that these last lines of Keats's Ode present to readers and critics is that they seem to have too slight or too general a connection with the rest of the poem. Are they merely a "fine sentiment", or do they sum up the whole meaning? The question is an important one, because on the answer must depend our view of the success or otherwise of the poem. Mr. Middleton Murry, while agreeing with their "philosophy", considers them to be out of place here. Mr. Cleanth Brooks, in *The Well-wrought Urn*, tentatively justifies them, but he seems to me to give a disproportionate significance to what might be called the surface paradoxes of the poem, and to miss the actual relevance of these lines, and so the meaning of the poem. Mr. Empson, in *The Structure of Complex Words*, while he does more justice to the importance of Keats's vision of the dual nature of experience, of joy and suffering, also questions the relevance of the lines. But I believe that a right reading of the poem will show that they are not tacked on, but spring from the experience that goes before. The "film of familiarity" that lies over the poem increases the difficulty of such a reading.

Keats is obviously concerned here with the nature of art, presumably poetry in particular, and the urn is an image or symbol of it. In the first stanza he contemplates it and, in two different ways, speaks of its silence and its long survival. The full significance of this is realised only in the last stanza, but already here we see in the urn a quietness like that Mr. Eliot has described:

"Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness."

It is a stillness which comprehends a living meaning, and the urn is unravished both in its artistic integrity, and in holding that final meaning which, like the "eternity" of the last stanza, lies beyond thought alone. The perfection of its form carries an immediacy of meaning that makes Keats say that it can

"thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme."

An inseparable part of the beauty and meaning of the urn is its

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"leaf-fring'd legend". Its pictures float up to our vision in a series of questions, and will be given exactitude in the next three stanzas. But the questions do more than that—they arouse unconsciously questionings that will not be satisfied merely by the beauty of description. The tale, beginning in pastoral sweetness, suddenly turns to struggle and wild ecstasy, and in two lines we are swept into a climax unexpected and Dionysian:

"What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?"

It foreshadows another climax, more passionate in its questioning, at the end of the third stanza.

The second stanza opens on a soft and lyrical note only less quiet than the first, and the hint of struggle and ecstasy is forgotten in a scene of fair youth and love, of melodies too sweet for the sensual ear to catch, that belong to a world where nothing fades, where beauty does not vanish and pass. Whether this is the world of art or of fancy we do not yet properly know, but for all its charm there has crept into it lightly a note of irony: the youth *cannot* leave his song, nor *can* the trees be bare, and the bold lover can never win his kiss. (There is also, perhaps, a touch of humorous irony in the poet's consolation to him, "for ever wilt thou love, and she be fair.") But slight as the irony is, it shows that a necessary condition of this eternity of love and happiness is unfulfilment.

Immediately after this we are plunged into a rhapsody of praise of this happy world that cannot bid the spring adieu, where youth and song and love are ever new and eager and untarnished. The wild ecstasy has passed, as it were, from the pictured scene into the poet—an ecstasy of praise so impassioned that it sweeps him into the cry of the last lines of the stanza, the aching contrast of the human condition. The praise has been a passionate cry for the unattainable, an agony of longing reflected in the repetitions of "happy", with an increasing intensity, and the poet is thrown back on the sorrow and disillusion that attend on the fulfilment of "breathing human passion"; and his cry ends in despair, "a burning forehead, and a parching tongue."

In the next stanza there is a complete change of tone; calm has succeeded the despairing cry of the "heart high-sorrowful and cloyed". It is different also from the lightly ironic tone of the second stanza: the rhythm has a breadth and a flow of unbroken lines greater than any other in the poem. And yet the theme is not love and happiness but sacrifice, and the stanza ends on a note of loss. The new tone shows that there has been a crisis, and that Keats has emerged from it with something gained. Mr. Empson accepts the fact that there is a crisis, but he sees it as extending into this stanza. Of the line,

"Who are these coming to the sacrifice?"

he says, "It is a cry of awe from the parching tongue, as the poet

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sees new victims approach, and the stanza goes on to say that none of them will ever go home again." This seems to me a confusion between two experiences. In the third stanza there is no sacrifice, but despair at the unfulfilment and disillusion that inevitably attend on human experience. Now Keats turns from the joyous "legend" that brought home to him this disillusion, and looks at the picture on the other side of the urn. It is that of a sacrifice, but the "victim" is a heifer; and though it is true that the people do not return, it is the little town that Keats calls "desolate". Mr. Empson goes on to say that in this stanza Keats achieves "an imaginative view of the world," and he regards the sacrifice as symbolic of the artist who gives up everything for the sake of art. "Beauty is both a cause of and an escape from suffering, and in either way suffering is deeply involved in its production."

It is true that Keats does achieve here an imaginative view of the world, but he does so because it is not *only* suffering and loss that he finds, nor, on the other hand, is beauty in any way an escape for him. The sacrifice in which these people are taking part is a "pious" ceremony, one performed by a "mysterious" priest. The "mystery" or office of the priest is connected with the piety of the ceremony, and these are, as these words imply, a due and necessary part of the life of the community, the outward sign of something inward and spiritual. For the life of the community to be "full of spiritual blessings," healthy and full and significant, sacrifice is necessary. The heifer is the vicarious victim, but by picturing the deserted town Keats has underlined the idea of loss in sacrifice; here the desolation of the town is a necessary condition of the ceremony. But that the "pious" life is rich is shown by the fact that the altar is green and the silken flanks of the heifer are decked with garlands; and although the little town is empty, bereft and desolate, the citadel at its heart is peaceful. Each image shows the two sides of life, accepted, reconciled and harmonized in the ceremony, and the whole is a symbol of the poet's experience.

The restored harmony shown in this image has been achieved by the poetic imagination which has enabled the poet to accept the truth and anguish of the heart high-sorrowful. Mr. Empson calls it "the sudden exertion of muscle by which Keats skids round the corner from self-pity to an imaginative view of the world." The self-pity is the "single" vision which sets in opposition sorrow and the joys of an illusory world, a world other than this one of "all breathing human passion." The imaginative vision, on the other hand, sees sacrifice and loss as a condition of human life, as anguish is of passion, and the acceptance of it as a reconcilement between joy and suffering. As it is the office of the priest to bring about the spiritual reconcilement, so it is the office of poetry to bring about the imaginative one. In this stanza the "shaping power" of the imagination is shown in image and language, and restored harmony is reflected in the flow of the rhythm.

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Keats's acceptance of suffering as a necessary element of life, and so also of the beauty of life, leads to the firm and confident statement of the last stanza:

> "O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
> Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
> With forest branches and the trodden weed."

The urn, beautiful and harmonious, with the diverse elements of its leafy legend, is the "fair attitude" of both outward form and spiritual harmony—the form or pattern of the work of art and the imaginative approach to life that is symbolized by it. It conveys this both to "the sensual ear" and to "the spirit". Forest branches and trodden weed take us back to the Dionysian struggles and ecstasies of the first stanza, but here they have become part of the marble frieze, of the harmony and discipline of a work of art. This is reinforced by the words "cold pastoral", which underline the fact that although it deals with the stuff and passion of life, art is by its very nature controlled and balanced—it is this living stuff that it controls and shapes into a work of art.

In the language and imagery of this stanza there is a concentration and economy which is absent from the first one, with its similar images. That one is tentative, questioning and more diffuse, and it is evident that the last stanza is the expression of what the poet has arrived at, experienced, in the course of the poem itself. The "silent form" is charged with added meaning. The legend that "haunt(ed) about" the urn now teases us "out of thought", and so impels us to an understanding or acceptance of its meaning that lies beyond thought alone, like the "mystery" of the priest and the poet. It is this that imposes harmony on conflicting impulses and feelings, first in the work of art, and then, by a process of purgation, in life. And it is this that will make the urn a friend to man "in midst of other woe than ours", because of its meaning—that "beauty is truth, truth beauty".

The chief stumbling-block to an understanding of the poem is the apparent irrelevance of this "message" to what has gone before, apparent, I believe, because of a wrong approach. There is the superficial reading, "the urn is a friend to man because it is beautiful and cheers him up", or the vague and sentimental acceptance of the line because it sounds pleasant and even profound, without the trouble of definition. But the serious reader has almost always been put off because his approach has been a "philosophic" one. In his book Mr. Empson has classified the different categories of meaning that can attach to the proposition "A is B", and for this poem he is concerned to find the appropriate one for "beauty is truth", and for "truth is beauty". But in so doing he is regarding the line as a metaphysical proposition instead of what it is, a poetic and therefore an imaginative and concrete statement. It may be worth noticing that although he uses capitals in the Ode, Keats

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gives none to beauty and truth—he is not equating two abstractions, Beauty and Truth, but is speaking of the observable qualities of concrete images.

As a result of this approach the line is almost always read out of its context. Mr. Empson says, "the chief puzzle about it is that one feels the poem has raised no question about truth before". This is far from being the case. Keats has not used the actual word before, but he has most clearly shown in the images of the poem the difference between truth and deception—that a world of eternal and unalloyed happiness is illusory, not the world of "breathing human passion". What he has shown to be true are the anguish and the fact that man can be reconciled to it. It would be scant friendship simply to dangle the unattainable before sorrowing man, but the implication in "do not grieve" in the "idyllic" stanza is surely that this happiness is itself an illusion, and its promise therefore false. The true vision of life is the imaginative one, and it is this with which art concerns itself. This is the truth implied in the beauty that is the urn, with its contrary but complementary images—the illusory joys that art rejects and the truth it accepts.

The second statement, that truth is beauty, means in the first place what Aristole meant by the pleasure of "recognition", even of what is painful—a recognition that "this is so"; and in the second place what he meant by "the pleasure proper to tragedy", which is a purgation of pity and fear. Keats himself speaks elsewhere of this kind of beauty in *King Lear*, one that springs out of "the fierce dispute/Betwixt damnation and impassioned clay". (Yeats says of tragedy that it leads us into the bridal chamber of joy.) This is not a tragedy but an ode, but what is fundamental to our view of tragedy holds good on this different level too. The line might then perhaps be paraphrased, "beauty—the urn, art—is not a cheat: it is real, though not what you fancied in Stanza II. And this reality, the truth of acceptance pictured in the fourth stanza, is beautiful". It is, in fact, a particular truth and beauty, those revealed by the urn, that Keats talks of, though this meaning of the urn will remain true to new generations as for past ages.

Of this "meaning" Keats says, "That is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know". The claim that he makes for this knowledge is not extravagant: the acceptance of the tragedy inescapably bound up with life as a necessity and a condition of beauty is fundamental—the first and last of man's needs. It is in giving this that the urn is a friend to man. Blake makes the same claim for it:

> "It is right it should be so;
> Man was made for Joy and Woe;
> And when this we rightly know
> Thro' the world we safely go."

For Keats, to know it rightly is to know it for beauty.

N. J. MARQUARD.

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