

Keats's Ode to a Grecian Urn

—For Ulrich Keller

THEY WHO MISQUOTE THE TITLE OF KEATS'S ODE MAY NOT BE AWARE OF the truth in their mistake. Indeed, Keats's poem is an ode not "on" but "to" a Grecian urn, most conspicuously so as it opens with a threefold apostrophe¹ and thereby fulfils the requirements of the genre more faithfully than most odes. This faithfulness exposes the poem to the question whether the apostrophe addresses a being worth the effort. Is the addressee an at least potentially responsive partner in the communicative situation of the ode, which is essentially a dialogic one though the utterance may be one-sided in the manner of the dramatic monologue. From its origins in the cult hymn,² the genuine partner of an odic address is a divine being, a god, goddess, or a godlike authority, capable of hearing, of understanding, of fulfilling a request. The invocation may not be received, the god may not listen, may not care, may not be willing or able to help—the precariousness of prayer—yet there must be a confidence in, and a possibility of, a gracious reception. This requirement is not withdrawn or diminished in post-religious circumstances with no established godhead to address. Then, the demand on the poem is even heavier. It is now the poem's task to create the authority to which it turns. The post-religious ode³ has to assume the status of poetic self-sufficiency, of, in Miltonic terms, Satanic self-creation, of being the poet's prayer to himself.⁴ Put in philosophical terms: It has to assume aesthetic autonomy. Religious belief is being replaced by the poetic faith of Coleridge's definition. Now the ode has to prove by its very performance that its address is a valid one, the foremost act of such

1. The term is used in its current meaning of an exclamatory address (*OED*), which, as J. Douglas Kneale ("Romantic Aversions: Apostrophe Reconsidered," *ELH* 58 [1991]: 141–65) points out, neglects the precise denotation of the figure *aversio*.

2. Kurt Schlüter, *Die englische Ode. Studien zu ihrer Entwicklung unter dem Einfluß der antiken Hymne* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1964).

3. The ode may actually be distinguished from the hymn by its being post-religious. Paul H. Fry emphasizes the distinction in "Introduction: The Man at the Gate," *The Poet's Calling in the English Ode* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980).

4. "The poet who can prolong presence, who can in-form or put under constraint his god or daemon, has 'taken on,' strictly speaking, the identity he has striven for. The longer he constrains his visitant, the more clearly his prayer becomes a prayer to himself" (Fry 12).

performance being, in Keats's case, the poetic creation of the urn. To the degree this creation succeeds in the course of the poem, the urn will have proved eligible for the odic address.

In itself, an urn seems an unpromising addressee. An ode to a pot is bound to be ridiculous. Then, what about an urn, an earthenware, at best a marble, pot? Can it bear the burden of an odic apostrophe, its serious solemnity? Is not the danger of bathos unavoidable? Would not the title "Ode to a Grecian Urn" announce a travesty? The embarrassment is evident in some literary critics' endeavor to upgrade the urn, notably into a funeral urn, a move which finds no support in the poem,⁵ but provides the opportunity for the critic to enrich the poem with ponderous thoughts on death and transitoriness, or with a plethora of symbolic lore.⁶ Conversely, other critics have valiantly embraced the precariousness of the inappropriate object with an emphasis on the abject state of the disused utensil, the piece of debris, which through this abasement is elevated to the state of art. From this point of view Keats's Ode is regarded as ancestral to surrealist translations of discarded utensils into art objects. Mentioning Duchamp's ready-mades, K. S. Calhoun barely suppresses the punning, though etymologically correct, connection between urn and urinal.⁷ Obviously the predicament has been noticed and there is no reason to assume that Keats was not aware of it. Is this why Keats avoids the obvious title and swerves to "Ode on a Grecian Urn," a phrase which does not immediately expose the

5. The assumption that the poem's object is a funeral urn was given currency by Leo Spitzer's flippant parenthesis—"(obviously consecrated to the ashes of a dead person)"—in "The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', or Content vs. Metagrammar," *Comparative Literature* 7 (1955); rpt. in *Essays on English and American Literature*, ed. Anna Hatcher (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1962) 67–97 (73). The only scholarly support may be derived from Ian Jack's tentative hint that Keats was perhaps thinking "of one of the large neo-Attic urns made in Rome between c. 50 B.C. and c. A.D. 50," urns which "were intended either as funerary caskets or as purely decorative objects" (*Keats and the Mirror of Art* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1967] 217)—a careful surmise, which does not make any further claims. Nevertheless, the assumption pervades interpretations of all colors and the list of such interpretations is long, including one in which a critic claims to know that the urn contains or contained the ashes of women.

6. Dorothy van Ghent adopts the hypothesis of the funeral urn and extends it by seeing the urn in the role of the Cumaean Sibyl and the Delphic oracle, recognizes it as "a kind of *anima mundi*—a world-soul or world memory," a "kind of *krater* or mixing-bowl of elemental symbols," a "kind of Grail, *servator mundi*, a vessel of food and healing" (*Keats: the Myth of the Hero*, revised and edited by J. C. Robinson [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983] 156–59).

7. K. S. Calhoun argues that it is the disuse which—true to Kant's definition—qualifies the urn, like Mörike's *Lampe*, as an aesthetic object ("The Urn and the Lamp: Disinterest and the Aesthetic Object in Mörike and Keats," *SiR* 26 [1987]: 3–25 [25]). He is preceded by Philip Fisher ("A Museum with One Work Inside: Keats and the Finality of Art," *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 33 [1984]: 85–102) who observes that the urn "once out of use . . . is no longer an urn, but 'debris' and that is has a "second life as a 'Grecian Urn,' a work of art no longer in connection with its original society" (89).

poem to the doom of bathos? But can the poem escape this doom? Do not the first lines quickly give away what the title may have tried to hide: that the poem is an ode to a Grecian urn, boldly confident of its success in establishing the urn's dignity?

The gesture of avoidance in the poem's title which after all announces what it refrains from announcing, namely an ode, which is generally an "ode to," may on the other hand not be a sign of embarrassment by the addressee's lowness, but a symptom of awe in the face of the silent work of art, even fear of the unmediated impact of beauty. Grant Scott senses this: "The prospect of paralysis before the silent beauty of the unravished bride is never far from the speaker's mind. . . ."⁸ This anxiety has been explained along psychological and gender lines. In the light of such explanations the sister arts turn out not to be sisters but siblings of different sex with visual art taking the female, verbal art the male part.⁹ The Medusa myth has been enlisted to contribute the motif of the petrifying female gaze "that so often charges the ekphrastic encounter between word and image."¹⁰ Awe and fear may turn to resentment which is nourished by the iconophobia traditional to Jewish-Christian culture.¹¹ But the resentment also inherits iconophobia's ambivalence, oscillating with the desire for what it shuns. This ambivalence may motivate a dialectic which makes ekphrasis reject

8. Grant F. Scott emphasizes the endeavor—in picture and portrait poems of the time—of the poet or speaker/observer to shield himself against the threat which the picture exerts, threatening to rob him of his speech—an endeavor which, at the same time, intends to make the picture speak (*The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, and the Visual Arts* [Hanover: UP of New England, 1994] 131). In the Ode, he finds, "the prospect of paralysis before the silent beauty of the unravished bride is never far from the speaker's mind" (132). Patricia A. Parker observes: ". . . silence is not a goal but a potential threat, and the poet's task is to make this stone shape speak. The condition of sculpture is, in this sense, the 'end' of poetry not as intention but as potential nemesis" ("Keats," in Hermione de Almeida, ed., *Critical Essays on John Keats* [Boston, MA: G. K. Hall, 1990] 103–128 [113]); excerpt from *Inescapable Romance. Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* [Princeton UP, 1979]). David Bromwich similarly points out: ". . . 'Cold pastoral!' is said much more in a tone of shock, and even of rebuke. . . . Eternity does not tease out of thought into something finer . . . but rather out of thought and out of life" ("Keats," in Hermione de Almeida 222–60 [254]; excerpt from *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic* [Oxford UP, 1984]).

9. G. Scott, appointing "sexual pursuit and ravishment" as the poem's "central metaphors," contends: "Perhaps more than any of its companions, 'Grecian Urn' is the one ode that begs to be read as an allegory of sexual identity, of feminine power and male fear" (120).

10. James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words. The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993) 109. Heffernan continues: "To serve as an instrument of explication, then, the Medusa model should be conceived as a *strand* in the fabric of ekphrasis, one of several ways in which ekphrasis manifests the antagonism of word and image."

11. See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986).

the image and yet aspire to a pictorial mode of existence in its own, literary ways as Murray Krieger argues in his exposition of the "ekphrastic principle."¹² The Ode's title dares not announce what the Ode is in fact about to venture: to establish a communicative relationship with the urn which, indeed, exists beyond the range of communicative exchange. The Ode is bound to attempt the task of drawing the incommunicative phenomenon into the domain of language and thereby translate language into the urn's aesthetic mode. This amounts to an endeavor to transcend the sphere of communication to which the poem, however, is genuinely attached by its medium, language. The ekphrastic negotiation which a poem addressing a work of visual art is bound to inaugurate will ineluctably be caught in this aporia, which is constitutive of literary art. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* devotes its attention to the dialectic evolving from this aporetic foundation of poetry. Adorno's remark on language and "Etruscan vases in the Villa Giulia" could apply to the Attic urn and Keats's Ode:

Owing to its dual character, language is a constitutive principle of art as well as art's mortal enemy. Etruscan vases in the Villa Giulia articulate something without using communicative language. In fact, the true language of art is speechless.¹³

Will Keats's poem attain the speechlessness of the true language of art? Or will it remain in opposition to the urn, unable to transcend "art's mortal enemy?"

One more hint, to pass over less convincing guesses,¹⁴ issues from the poem's title, suggesting a factual as well as conceptual attachment of urn and poem. The ode is announced like, even as, an epigram, in its Greek origins an inscription in verse usually placed on a statue, tomb, or funerary column.¹⁵ In this regard the most plain and simple-minded inference to be

12. "The final trick . . . for language is to complete its bid for supremacy by taking on the here-ness of the plastic arts, turning itself into a form that creates the illusion of becoming its own emblem, an internal ekphrasis, almost sensuous after all, though without touching the earth" (*Ekphrasis: The Illusion of Natural Sign* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992] 22).

13. T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt, ed. G. Adorno & R. Tiedemann (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) 164.

14. Earl Wasserman (*The Finer Tone. Keats' Major Poems* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1953] 58–59) reads the preposition "on" as announcing a commentary on the urn—the literary critic's attempt to put his own work on a par with the poem. Paul D. Sheats ("Keats and the Ode," in Susan J. Wolfson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Keats* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001] 86–101) repeats Wasserman's proposition (93).

15. Jean H. Hagstrum explains: "The Greek word *epigramma* originally referred to an inscription in verse usually placed on a statue, tomb, or funerary column. . . . It was one of the oldest devices of the Greek epigrammatist to make the statue, the urn, the column, or the monument speak to the beholder or passer-by . . . the mute statue was given a voice and the silent form was endowed with the power of speech" (*The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1958] 22).

drawn from the poem's title would be to perceive the text of the ode inscribed "on a Grecian urn." This would enrich the poem's discourse on ekphrasis by a recourse to the prototypical encounter of visual and literary art,¹⁶ the epigrammatic fiction of a speaking stone set in relief by the silent stone on which the epigram is inscribed, an encounter devised by the antagonistic collusion of the stonemason and the epigrammatist versed in the rhetoric of *prosopopoeia*. The epigrammatist gives a fictional voice and, as it were, face, *prosopon*, to the stone; the mason silences this voice into writing chiselled into the stone, reducing language to a lapidary materiality, which the passer-by may again redeem into speech.

To follow this suggestion made by the title and to assume that Keats meant the Ode to be perceived as an inscription on the urn would, however, stretch poetic license to a degree which seriously strains the poet's credit. Putting an ode in the place of an epigram might be appreciated, even relished as a Romantic disdain of genre rules. But a Greek vase or urn with an English Romantic ode inscribed on it would be too grotesque an invention. The poem rejects this imputation line for line as its speaker inspects the urn's surface without registering, except, perhaps, for the last lines, an appearance of his own words.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the title's suggestion

16. Hagstrum even reserves the term "ekphrasis" for this rudimentary encounter: "I use the noun 'ecphrasis' and the adjective 'ecphrastic' in a more limited sense to refer to that special quality of giving voice and language to the otherwise mute art object" (18, n. 34). J. Heffernan rejects Hagstrum's restriction: "Unlike Jean Hagstrum, who makes this envoicing a necessary condition for ekphrasis . . . I treat it as one of several features that may not all be present in any one ekphrastic poem or passage" (194, n. 17). Yet he follows Hagstrum's directions: "Traditionally, we have seen, ekphrasis is *prosopopoeial*; like the sepulchral epigrams from which it partly derives, it aspires to give the work of art a voice. . . . Since *legend* originally meant 'to be read,' ancient travellers could make a sepulchral inscription speak by reading it aloud" (6 and 111).

17. This doesn't keep critics from assuming the improbable. Garrett Stewart observes: "The . . . speaker turns next to a Grecian Urn and an ode *on* (or upon) it: not 'about' or (as in earlier odes) 'to' it . . . but the ambiguous work of poetic form on the worked surface of the *objet d'art* itself" ("Keats and Language," in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats* 135–51 [144]). The assumption is maintained more sophisticatedly by Paul H. Fry, who views the poem from its "final point" as an "ode on," boldly jumps the genre distinction and states that "this ode is an inscription or epigram," then modifies this statement into the hypothetical mode: "[The ode] should be envisioned as though it were inscribed on a described object," then finds reason to switch to the poem's "equally strong identity as an 'ode to,' even to the diagnosis "more ode than epigram," eventually returns to the initial statement of the urn being "an inscription or epigram" (248). Geraldine Friedman writes, with reference to Paul Fry: "On the one hand, as an ode, the poem announces its functioning as a figure and a fiction: an extended direct address to an entity incapable of literal response. On the other hand, and as an ode *on*, 'Grecian Urn' foregrounds its material condition as writing on a surface. Between these contradictory emphases on the sounding of voice and the silence of inscription opens a gap in which the poem stages an eroticized drama of interpretation" ("Erotics of Interpretation in Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn': Pursuing the Feminine," *SIR* 32 [1993]: 225–43 [225, see also 241]).

of a collusion or competition between the two genres—ode and epigram—is intriguing and has elicited wily remarks such as Martin Aske's hint at the poem being written "on" the urn, not literally, but as "a parergonal trace which seeks to reinscribe itself on the silent, ineffable space of the absent image of the urn" or "as a parergonal inscription over an absent, or at least never completely represented object."¹⁸ In the final lines of the Ode the epigrammatic genre will emphatically assert its claims and the negotiations between an "Ode to a Grecian Urn" and an "Epigram on a Grecian Urn" will be resumed.

The opening of the poem does not follow the evasive strategy and the oblique suggestions of the title. It sets out with an uninhibited odic address, yet avoids both the embarrassment of addressing an unworthy object and the intimidation by an inaccessible phenomenon by avoiding the name—as does, indeed, the rest of the poem. It never, through all its five stanzas, has recourse to a plain "O, urn!" The strategy of getting away from—and with—the odic address to an urn is, in the first three lines, the rhetoric of metaphor. The poem tropes away from the risk of banality or presumptuousness, transfiguring the urn into the "still unravished bride," the "fosterchild," the "sylvan historian." The urn fades behind the images imposed upon it. In this manner the poem establishes a responsible partner. It does so in a halting manner: the ode is in search of its addressee. The first two attempts are inconsequential, suggestive as they may be. The "still unravished bride of quietness" surprises as a conceit of an incipient allegory which does not develop into one. The prospect of such a development is awkward, to say the least. What kind of marriage to the bridegroom "Quietness" may be envisaged? What consummation? What ravishment? Death? A less radical reading may avoid the allegorical personification of quietness and take the word simply as a qualifying genitive, presenting the urn as a quiet virgin.¹⁹ In either case the word "still," read as an adverb, sounds a premonition of doom threatening the virginity of the "yet" unravished bride. Could it be that the ode, with a coy cynicism, emphasizes what it is eager to destroy: the integrity of the urn as a silent, a non-speaking entity, existing beyond the reach of communicative intimacy, a thing of beauty? Was the urn secure in its unravished state as long as it was a bride of quietness, from which this very address tries to abduct her? Whatever the reading,²⁰ this opening conceit proves a barren one and is not pursued beyond

18. *Keats and Hellenism. An Essay* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 110–11.

19. Geraldine Friedman elaborates most intricately on the implications of these alternatives (238–42).

20. Patricia A. Parker perceives that the "urn itself . . . is suspended between two potential ravishers—the poet who desires to make this shape reveal its 'tale,' and 'quietness,' the fate to which it is betrothed but not yet finally joined" (113). Geoffrey Hartman's phrase of the "ex-

the first line. There is, however, a note struck here which will recur. The notion of stillness and silence will return as a *leitmotif* throughout the poem.²¹ It will soon be taken up and continued in the figures of the frieze on the urn—though with a difference: The stasis, which keeps those figures “for ever” in their position and from achieving what they aspire to, is brought about by their being frozen into an image, while the urn’s stillness is qualified by the ambiguity of the word “still,” which, as an adverb, suggests the temporality of “not yet.” The urn is, after all, subject to the ravages of time.²²

The second conceit, the one of the “fosterchild of silence and slow time,” emphasizes the temporality of the urn’s stillness. As a fosterchild of “slow time,” the urn is capable of a history which, perhaps imperceptibly, may bring about change, fruition, ravishment of whatever kind. The third attempt at a valid invocation seems to take its cue from the second line’s emphasis on time and history. As a “sylvan historian” the urn is supposed to know history and to be a source of historical knowledge.

The sequence of three figurative attempts to open a channel to the urn raises doubts about the aptness of the procedure. The rhetoric of metaphor is, after all, grounded in *aporia*. Metaphor, like its extension, allegory, is resorted to when the proper term is deemed inappropriate or unavailable and a non-proper term is inserted in its place—to the effect of a hovering validity which is held in suspense by the knowledge that the term is not the proper one. The paradox of the wrong term being the only appropriate or possible one accounts for the precariousness of metaphoric speech. The three initial apostrophes of the “Ode” are impaired by this precariousness. They are misnomers. In addition, the attempt at establishing familiarity by inventing a figurative family may block rather than open the way to the

plainer-ravisher” (“History Writing as Answerable Style,” in *The Fate of Reading and other Essays* [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1975] 102) has subsequently evoked intensifying echoes, e.g. from J. Heffernan: “To address and still more to interrogate a womblike vessel as a still unravished bride of quietness is to threaten her with rape” (111). It is not without a sadistic relish that the speaker is seen in the role of the urn’s ravisher, a role which the literary critic feels invited to assume in turn toward the poem. This can produce the kind of academic pornography we register in the question “whether there is anything left for criticism to ravish” (Heffernan 108) or in the observation that “in the prevailing metaphor of the poem . . . the speaker enters the urn, finds it frigid and unaccommodating (barren even), and quickly withdraws” (Scott 139).

21. For a recent study of the motif see J. R. Watson, “Keats and Silence,” in Michael O’Neill, ed., *Keats. Bicentenary Readings* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1997) 70–87.

22. This distinction is ignored by Diane Brotemarkle who lumps urn and frieze together into a “symbol of artworks in general . . . marking one quality that belongs to almost all the arts: frozen time” (*Imagination and Myths in John Keats’s Poetry* [San Francisco: Mellen Research UP, 1993] 59).

urn's identity. The erotic note which is struck by the first address—and which has occasioned numerous interpretations along gender lines—has the awkward courtesy of someone trying to be amorous to another man's bride. The fact that the first two conceits are abandoned is indicative of the speaker's insecurity. The third attempt, "Sylvan historian," seems to hit an appellation capable of carrying the poem. Or does it? Does it perhaps divert the poem into a string of futile digressions, from which it cannot desist and from which it only just reverts in its last stanza? Is the ode by these digressions deferring its end and thereby maintaining its existence—beyond the pleasure principle?

As it stands, the poem settles for the "sylvan historian," whose "flowery tale" will soon absorb the speaker's interest. The approach remains tentative. Vagueness veils the probably female figure, sylph or not,²³ of the "sylvan historian." Is s/he supposed to be a teller of tales, a "storian"? Or is there a historical dimension to what s/he is expected to deliver? A probing into the Greek past, as may well be expected from the fosterchild of "slow time?" And why "sylvan?" Does the epithet refer to the florid style of the teller of a "flowery tale." Does it refer to the leaf-ornament bordering the frieze? Or does it characterize the historian herself? Does it mark her/him as a natural source of intimation whose medium is the symbol, which, in Walter Benjamin's poetic phrase, contains meaning "in its hidden and, if one may say so, sylvan interior."²⁴ Or is the emphasis on the "naturalness" of the history delivered by the urn, which is not the antiquarian's or the scholar's production but that of the poetic genius who has his authenticity as an instance of nature, writing "history without footnotes," as Cleanth Brooks put it. Obviously, the sylvan historian's history is set in the aesthetic mode; it is a work of art, the sculpted relief on the urn's surface.

Figured as a "sylvan historian," the urn is shifted from the position of addressee to that of the speaker's consort, colleague and competitor in the poetic function of expressing a flowery tale, which the urn, in its sculpted frieze, is said to perform "more sweetly" than the speaker can. The con-

23. James O'Rourke hears the (etymologically justified) pun on "sylph" (*Keats's Odes and Contemporary Criticism* [UP of Florida, 1998] 60).

24. "Das Zeitmaß der Symbolerfahrung ist das mystische Nu, in welchem das Symbol den Sinn in sein verborgenes und, wenn man so sagen darf, waldiges Innere aufnimmt" (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* [Berlin: Rowohlt, 1928; rev. ed. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1963] 182); in J. Osborne's translation: "The measure of time for the experience of the symbol is the mystical instant in which the symbol assumes the meaning into its hidden and, if one may say so, wooded interior" (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama* [London: Verso, 1977] 164–65). Benjamin's definition of the symbol suits Wasserman's interpretation, which explains the term "sylvan historian" in the way Benjamin's sentence suggests: "Herein lies the difference between 'pageant' and 'sylvan' history. . . . The difference is that between history and symbol" (58).

frontation of the visual against the linguistic mode, of visual art against poetry, of *Malerei und Poesie*, is broached in these opening lines. Judged by the sensuous, aesthetic criterion of sweetness, visual art is given precedence over verbal art. Yet by attributing to visual art the same task to which he himself is dedicated, namely to tell a tale, the speaker moves the confrontation into the domain of language and loads the dice in favor of the literary mode. Whatever the advantage of visual art in the contest, its achievement will be the same as what the speaker aspires to. Now, to expect pictures to tell a tale is certainly not extraordinary. The narrative element in the visual arts is a prominent issue in art scholarship. It tends, however, to be converted into an issue of literary scholarship. In the context of the Ode's opening stanza the pronounced interest in tale and legend betrays a reluctance to appreciate visual art. The speaker disregards the possibility of a radical heterogeneity of visual art. He asks for tale and detail instead of aesthetically appreciating art and image. He is determined to read, not to behold. To him, the frieze presents a "legend" which he is bound to decipher. The "sylvan historian" is approached as a source of information and the epithet seems to activate the traditional meaning of *silva* as a source of material: story as store.

The pictorial medium does not readily deliver what the speaker expects. The flowery tale which the sylvan historian is said to express so sweetly is nor forthcoming. The speaker's expectation may have been wrongly placed. He may have been deceived by his own metaphor: The urn may just not be a historian—sylvan or other. Indeed, it insists on its own mode of presentation: a marble relief of figures, frozen into their position, not able to move into the continuum of a tale.

The speaker is undaunted. He is determined to have a tale told him through the pictures of the frieze. With the question "What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape" he loses sight of the urn and its metaphoric disguises and enters a sphere distinct from the urn as such. The pronoun "thy" is the last reference to the sylvan historian or the urn before the latter will be invoked again in the last stanza. The leaf-fringe may be taken as the frame constituting this sphere—as the *parergon* which Derrida, taking his cue from Kant,²⁵ develops into the concept and emblem of the margin de-

25. *La vérité en peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978); *The Truth in Painting*, trans. by Geoff Bennington & Ian McLeod (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987). In *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (ed. and trans. P. Guyer [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000] § 14) Kant introduces—in the second edition—the word "Parerga" to explain "Zieraten," which, he argues, qualify as objects of a pure aesthetic judgment because of their formality, being free from effects of "Reiz": "Even what one calls **ornaments** (parerga), i.e. that which is not internal to the entire representation of the object as a constituent, but only belongs to it externally as an addendum and augments the satisfaction of taste, still does this only through its form: like the

limiting the aesthetic mode. The fringe in Keats's ode, to be precise, does not circumscribe the sphere of art as a whole but severs non-representative from representative art within the aesthetic sphere, thereby breaking up the integrity of that sphere. It distinguishes the urn—the “shape”—from the zone of pictorial representation, which, beyond its material reality as part of the urn, is of a different quality: It is an apparition of reality, it “haunts about thy shape.”²⁶ The speaker is intrigued by the urn's display of sculpted images and neglects the possibly beautiful shape of the urn. The urn does not interest him the way the frieze does. The urn's silence may be impressive, yet it is the obvious and plain property of the thing. The silence of the piping piper, by contrast, is of a logical intricacy which will absorb the speaker's interest. The urn's—slow time's fosterchild's—lasting through the ages is venerable, yet it is a durability it has in common with any cup, horse-bit or axe preserved through the centuries. The suspension of time which exempts the youthful singer, the trees, the bold lover from temporality challenges the understanding in a different manner. It is this challenge which the speaker is about to meet—with questionable success. Aesthetic considerations are faded out. What occupies the speaker in these stanzas is not the beauty of the frieze's images. Beauty is not a topic in the ode until it is broached in the last stanza. This decisive strategy of the poem is ignored in the ubiquitous critics' opinion that the beauty of the urn or its frieze is the poem's concern right from the beginning.²⁷ The word “fair”

borders of paintings, draperies on statues, or colonnades around magnificent buildings . . .” (110–11). Among “free beauties,” examples of *pulchritudo vaga*, he counts “designs à la grecque, foliage for borders or on wallpaper” (§16), examples highly suggestive of the Ode's subject.

26. Wasserman remarks on this peculiarity and sees the frieze in an ambiguous relationship to the urn, “fluid, malleable, instead of fixed.” He explains: “The frieze is not superimposed upon the urn or juxtaposed to it; it is the spectral essence that is independent of the urn and yet, at the same time, is diffused through the urn's atmosphere. This paradox of indwelling and independence is the precondition for oxymoronic fusion” (19). Martin Aske comments on the “long-forgotten story” which “haunts about” the urn's shape, like an apparition hovering restlessly without ever being able to settle” as the “‘flowery tale’ at the urn's secret centre becomes displaced and ‘unwritten’ as an array of partial images which refuse to organize themselves into a visibly coherent picture” (111). At one further remove Paul Fry makes out the reader's or the scholar's interpretation haunting the urn's shape: “The surrounding of the round urn, necessarily but also deliberately kept from touching the urn's expressive surface, is the hermeneutic circle. Interpretation, the unfolding map or ‘legend’ that helps us to read the urn, is an *unexpressive* voice because it is indeterminate . . . a ditty of no tone” (251).

27. Earl Wasserman (37–39 and 48) makes beauty the topic of the first part of the ode, with a climax achieved in the mystical experience of stanza three. Helen Vendler remarks on the frieze that its “forms, and the attitudes in which they are displayed, are beautiful—in the largest sense of that word . . .” (*The Odes of John Keats* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983] 117). Geraldine Friedman takes “the beauty of the poem's language” for granted (230).

does occur in stanza two, but it refers to a maiden's beauty, not to the work of art. What is at issue in these stanzas are the intricacies of representation and, by implication, the intricacies of ekphrasis, not beauty.

The speaker's absorption into the pictorial world of the frieze begins as inquisitiveness, manifest in a series of standard questions: What is the story? What is the site? Who are the persons? What is going on?²⁸ No explicit answer acknowledges the propriety of this inquisitiveness: A lesson whose teaching may eventually be registered, when the last stanza states what is needful to know. Yet critics protest too much when they point out the urn's refusal to meet the speaker's request and expatiate on the urn's secretiveness. After all, it may not tell a tale, but in its own way it provides a wealth of detailed information, which the speaker—and the reader of the poem—can perceive without effort. Nor need the speaker's questioning be denounced as an intrusion when it may more appropriately be perceived as a wondering, even admiring acknowledgement of a sight—with an ekphrastic side-effect of divulging what is being seen. The enquiry clearly shifts towards astonishment as the pronoun proceeds from the interrogative to the affective, exclamatory "what!" "What wild ecstasy?"—*pace* the question mark—no longer asks a question but expresses amazement. Observation and inquiry give way to empathic participation, which continues through the following stanzas, as the speaker drifts further into an empathic involvement in the imaginary world of the urn's relief, from storied urn to animated bust.

The speaker's naïve participation comes to an end when he suddenly becomes aware of the representational mode, the duplicity of representation and what is represented, the difference of art and life: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter." The initial consciousness of the unreality of the haunting legend of deities or mortals has faded to some degree in the last four lines of the first stanza. Now it is regained in the puzzling insight that there is a presence of something absent—"unheard melodies." As if taking a hint from Adorno's use of the passage as the epigraph to his Schönberg essay in *Prisms*, Marshall Brown has developed the *topos* into a negative dialectic which vindicates the presence of what is materially absent

J. Heffernan's contention that "in equating truth with beauty . . . the urn affirms what the poem has so far denied" (114) implies that the poem has been playing the two, truth and beauty, against each other all along. In the same vein J. O'Rourke finds: "As the poem moves toward identifying 'beauty' with naturalistic truth rather than with unheard melodies, it presents a sentimental beauty whose inadequacy is clarified by contrast with a beauty that is real" (69).

28. Helen Vendler: "The constitutive trope of the urn is interrogation, that trope of the perplexed mind" (118). Cf. Susan Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986).

as a constitutive feature in art.²⁹ In tacit propinquity to Kant who, in elaborating the third moment of the judgment of taste, distinguishes “form” as the constituent of the true judgment of taste from “matter” (“Reize und Rührungen”/“charms and emotions”),³⁰ Brown demonstrates the formative function of what is unheard, unseen, unread in given passages of a work of art, passages in which the artist achieves the logically impossible: produces absolute form which is not the form of anything, but “performs” by sheer absence of something formed. The argument comes close to Derrida’s elaboration of the *paregon*, the forming frame which becomes manifest after any substance has been whittled away,³¹ but vanishes at the moment of its pure manifestation. Being neither within the work nor without, it disappears in the abysmal gulf of negativity from which, however, it performs the function of framing. Taking its cue from the praise of “unheard melodies” in Keats’s ode Brown’s vindication of form against “base materialisms and empty formalisms” (*Turning Points* 267) discovers in those lines more than the poem’s speaker does. The speaker puts into a nutshell what he does not unfold. By him the unheard melodies are not considered in the context of the musical performance where they may function as “structure, skeleton, attitude, feeling” (*Turning Points* 255). They are perceived as melodies silenced by their transference into the sphere of visual art. Here the poem briefly exhibits a case of ekphrasis involving the other sister art: Music is presented by visual art, with a certain sleight of sculptor’s rhetoric presenting the piper as a metonymy of his music. The sculptor’s ekphrasis of music is ekphrastically presented by the ode, which in turn is a musical, at least an audible, presentation, muted into a written text. A cunning introduction to the poem’s central topic! The recourse to the criterion of sweetness recalls the previous confrontation of

29. Marshall Brown, “Unheard Melodies. The Force of Form,” *PMLA* 107 (1992): 465–81; rpt. in Marshall Brown, *Turning Points. Essays in the History of Cultural Expressions* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997) 239–67.

30. Kant, who obviously shared with the clown in *Othello* (III.1) an aversion to audible music for its “lack of urbanity,” i.e. its unbidden obtrusion on the ear (*Power of Judgment* § 53), stipulates in his elaboration of the third moment of the judgment of taste in §§ 13 and 14 the independence of the pure aesthetic judgment, from “charm and emotions,” which only concern “the judgments of sense (material aesthetic judgments).”

31. “One might be tempted, in exploiting this example (and nothing prohibits this by right) to conclude that contrary to what we were justified in thinking elsewhere, according to Kant the *paregon* constitutes the place and the structure of free beauty. Take away from a painting all representation, all signification, any theme and any text-as-meaning, removing from it also all the material (canvas, paint) which according to Kant cannot be beautiful for itself, efface any design oriented by a determinable end, subtract the wall-background, its social, historical, economic, political supports, etc.: what is left? The frame, the framing, plays of forms and lines which are structurally homogeneous with the frame-structure . . .” (*The Truth in Painting* 97–98).

the sylvan historian's tale and the speaker's rhyme and again sides with the greater sweetness of the mute art which—if the term applies—enchants the speaker, the singer of Keats's verse. What are we, readers and listeners, to make of his chant? Or is it cant? Is he not up to appreciating the heard melody of the song he is singing, of which he is the source and the instrument? Does he disavow the aural quality of his own utterance, the rhymes and rhythms of his verse, its sound effects and paronomasias? Evidently, an ode, *αοιδη*, is not a "ditty of no tone." Would he prefer his song, a "heard melody," to be muted into the representation of a song, a melody unheard? Does he aspire to a marble image of himself chanting the ode? Is the desired upgrading indeed performed by the written text which may be read without being heard? Is the text to the speaker what the urn is to the piper—the cold pastoral transfiguring his song into a written poem? This consideration, of course, breaks open the closed entity of the poem which harbors no writer, only a speaker. The written text of the poem is not contained within the poem. The notion of the frame, the *parergon*, again asserts itself. The text of the ode is there to frame and present the speaker's or singer's performance, which itself is not a writing performance and therefore excludes the text. The poem is contained in and by the text, not by itself. Not being self-contained it foregoes the absoluteness of aesthetic autonomy. It depends. On the written text, as this text depends on its writer, the poet, perhaps on the poet's amanuensis, who received the poet's words as the poet, in Milton's conceit, received the call of the muse: as a "ditty," a dictation prospective of its mutation into a written, eventually printed, text.

The coincidence of frieze and text both transposing the audible into silence highlights a connection of what is conventionally arranged in opposition: the visual and the verbal. As a written text the word dwells like the melody unheard in the visual realm, transcending the aural sphere. To the speaker's mind and the poem's logic the negation of aural sensuousness overrules the positivity of visual sensuousness and attributes to mute visuality a non-sensuous, spiritual quality: A curious revision of the traditional affiliation of spirit, voice and hearing on the one hand and body, image and beholding on the other arranges visually mediated spirituality against aural sensuality. What elevates those inaudible melodies is that they are piped "to the spirit." In the same vein the poem, which has saved the speaker's odic utterance into the permanence of a written text, plays to the spirit. As "ditties of no tone" both may be perceived by intellectual intuition, the Romantic philosophers' stone.³²

32. Kenneth Burke ("Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats," *Accent* [1943]; rpt. in *A Grammar of Motives* [New York: George Braziller, 1955] 447–63) comments on the "mystic

The visual as the spiritual medium is played off against the aural as the sensuous medium and this resumes the reflection on the representational mode which has been the poem's concern since the speaker's attention turned to the frieze's images. Spirituality is ascribed not to the visual sense as such but to the world of semblance which is brought about by visual mimesis. Aural mimesis, though well established in onomatopoeic practices, hardly sustains a separate sphere corresponding or referring to a first world but tends to fall back into the continuum of sound and noise. It repeats rather than represents. Music—"heard melodies"—is, *pace* Aristotle,³³ not a mimetic art and derives its claims to spirituality from other quarters. Visual representation genuinely establishes the realm of semblance in its ambiguity of illusion and deception on the one hand and apparitional spirituality on the other. Oscillating between deception and epiphany, between idol and ideal, *Schein* conditions the relation between beauty and truth in a precariousness which quivers in the word *specious*.

The speaker falls for both, the deception and the ideality of a realm far above "all breathing human passion." True, he has achieved an awareness of the peculiar mode of representational art. He ought to be conscious of the different modes of existence and not to perceive the scene in an inappropriate immediacy. There, behind the mirror, is the realm of melodies heard, here the zone of melodies unheard. But the neat distinction is immediately blurred. In an inconclusive conclusion—"therefore"—the speaker exhorts the "soft pipes" to play on, an exhortation lost on pipes whose metonymic softness has changed into hard marble. They do play on—unheard melodies have to be performed too, as we have learned—but the art of performing unheard melodies has been taken over by the art of representation behind which the live music has vanished. This is what the speaker half knows and half forgets. He gets entangled in an interpolation of the two levels or modes, resulting in the paradoxical statements which posit the coexistence of mutually exclusive qualities. The coalescence of life and art, endowing the life processes with the atemporality of the sculpted image, is an achievement reserved to verbal, denied to visual presentation. The poem is, in these passages, an exercise in and comment on the possibilities of verbal ekphrasis, which comprehends both representa-

oxymoron" of the unheard melodies: "Here the poet . . . is meditating upon *absolute* sound, the *essence* of sound, which would be soundless as the prime mover is motionless, or as the 'principle' of sweetness would not be sweet . . ." (449).

33. Aristotle's ranking of music foremost among the imitative arts is firmly grounded in his conception of character and a character's emotional and ethic state which finds its mimetic expression in music. This notion of *mimesis* as expression, which attributes to visual arts a less direct mimetic quality (*Politica* VIII.5.1340a), is distinct from that of a representation in the same sensual medium.

tion and the life represented. Its lesson is confirmed by default in critics' unthinking attempt to grasp the verbal performance again in a visual image. Helen Vendler's recourse to the well-known duck/rabbit sketch³⁴ misses the point. Whilst the picture insists on an either/or perception, though this may speed up to a vertiginous flickering, language can embrace the alternatives within its regular syntax. Misled by the example in the other medium, Vendler believes that there is a "quick shuttling back and forth in the speaker's mind between immersion in the fervent matter and recognition of the immobile medium" (128). In the same vein James Heffernan argues: "Up to the very moment when the urn finally speaks, the poem seems to tell us that we cannot have both [i.e. fixed beauty of visual art and the language of narrative] at once, that we must choose between the narratable truth of a passionately mutable life and immutable beauty of graphic art" (114). Yet it is this distinction which the poem tries to obliterate. The poem, unlike the sketch, confounds the two modes of existence, though it does not fuse them into a *unio mystica* as Wasserman contends.³⁵

The speaker loses orientation in his confrontation with three tiers of existence—the live scene, its pictorial representation, the verbal ekphrasis. He is fascinated—and fascinates the reader willing to go along with him³⁶—by

34. The career of the sketch from *Die Fliegenden Blätter* is as remarkable as the uses to which it has been put. From a reproduction in *Harper's Magazine* it found its way into Joseph Jastrow, *Fact and Fable in Psychology* (London: Macmillan, 1901) 295. He points out the either/or perception of the "ambiguous figure": "Most observers find it difficult to hold either interpolation steadily, the fluctuations being frequent, and coming as a surprise" (292). Ludwig Wittgenstein gleans the sketch into his *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G. E. M. Anscombe [Oxford: Blackwell, 1953] 194–96). E. H. Gombrich (*Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1960]) reproduces the sketch and Jastrow's observation: "We can switch from one reading to another . . . [but] cannot experience alternative readings at the same time" (5). The sketch has also inspired John Hollander's poem on the "Dabbit."

35. Borrowing the term "mystic oxymoron" from Kenneth Burke and the term "bourne of heaven" from *Endymion* (l. 295), Wasserman constructs an opposition and a fusion not of life and art, but of "the human and mutable on the one hand, and the immortal and essential on the other" (14), a *unio mystica* which the poem is said to arrange in its third stanza, to dissolve in its fourth and to hold out as a permanent possibility provided by art in its final sentence. Ulrich Keller's concept of the "moment" (*Augenblick*) as the mode of poetic integration can be seen in propinquity to Wasserman's notion of a mystic union of disparate elements, yet Keller's integrative "moment" harbors an element of reflexivity that corrodes the integrity which it helps to constitute. See Ulrich Keller, *Der Augenblick als dichterische Form in der Lyrik von William Wordsworth and John Keats* (Bad Homburg: Gehlen, 1970) 112–28.

36. James Heffernan clings to stubborn good sense and refuses to go along with the poem's persuasive effort when he predicts: "What will and must happen—the ugly truth devouring the sculpted beauty—is that the lovers will become unbearably frustrated" (113), which is exactly what the poem disavows.

bizarre contaminations of the three. He is tricked into seeing breathing human passion transported beyond the realm of breathing human passion. He reimports the petrified figures into an imaginary life-world to the effect of a perpetual “now.” The atemporality of the representation is converted into perpetuity. The speaker does not reflect on the logic of this prestidigitation. He simply falls for it, answering effect with affect. Like the naïve playgoer, who encourages and warns the *dramatis personae*, he takes part in what he half sees, half imagines—exhorting the pipes to play on, giving instruction and consolation to the youthful singer and to the lover. The next stanza parades the speaker in a state of abandon, whipping up happiness, “More happy love! more happy, happy love!” The “more” may even lose the function of the grammatical comparative and turn into a hungry cry for “more.” As he attributes “happy love” to the marble figures, he wallows in it himself, getting carried away in the rhythm of “happy, happy” which pulls the poem down to a child’s performance on a hobby horse, mocking the “Hoppe, hoppe Reiter” of the German nursery. Closer to home and to the text is, of course, “The Idiot Boy,” the galloping rhythm of “happy, happy John,” which in turn echoes that of Wilhelm’s horse, the “Hurre, hurre, hopp hopp hopp,” in G. A. Bürger’s “Lenore.”

This loss of distance and control has been remarked on, has given occasion to blame and ridicule,³⁷ or to awkward excuses, though it may also be read with an ear for an interlacing of sympathy, envy and rejection.³⁸ To extol the stanza, as Thomas McFarland does, as an outcome of “the white-hot moment of genius”³⁹ reflects unfavorably on the concept of genius and suggests that the poet may have burnt his fingers. Indeed, the stanza may be called silly, the more so if the old meaning of “seely,” preserved in the German *selig*, is recalled. Yet it has its place in the poem. James O’Rourke ascribes its poetic failure to the speaker’s futile attempts at ekphrasis—by extension to the generic futility of ekphrasis—which will only be overcome when the speaker extricates himself from his subservience to visual art and moves “beyond the recycling of the imagery contained on the urn, and to offer its own antithesis. . . . So long as the poem attempts to reproduce the imagery contained on the urn, it can only repeat itself. . . . The repetition of ‘happy, happy boughs’ . . . demonstrates, in its monotony, what happens when the simultaneity of the visual arts is transposed directly into poetry. . . .” O’Rourke concludes that “the speaker is disabled to a degree

37. O’Rourke reports that “in the opinion of all commentators except Earl Wasserman, the poem becomes thoroughly banal as the second and third stanzas extend the speaker’s desire for an imaginary ideal” (66).

38. As does Walter Jackson Bate in *John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1963) 78–79.

39. Thomas McFarland, *The Masks of Keats. The Endeavour of a Poet* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 197.

that verges on stuttering."⁴⁰ His very involvement alienates the speaker from the condition he tries to render verbally. The verbal medium turns the sameness of the happy still-life into repetitiveness, and the imaginary participation in the blissful state of the frieze's figures in fact throws the speaker into the condition of a "breathing human passion," which "leaves a heart high sorrowful and cloy'd," the very condition he thought he had evaded. His reaching out for those figures' happiness leaves him at best in a state of being too happy in their happiness.⁴¹ Eventually he abandons this futile attempt and reflects, in the stanza's last lines, on the contrast between the two conditions.

These explorations take the poem far beyond a simple deliberation about the respective advantages of life and art, a question which preoccupies the Stillinger collection of 1968,⁴² with Wasserman's book of 1953 and Cleanth Brooks' essay of 1945 in the background, and makes a recent handbook fall behind the state of current discussion.⁴³ Nor does the poem offer information on Keats's personal preference of art to life or vice versa. Speculations whether Keats's predilection was with "his fair love's ripening breast" rather than with marble ones may be appreciated in a jocular mood which made Cleanth Brooks cite e. e. cummings' funny rhyme, "A pretty girl that naked is / Is worth a million statues."⁴⁴ The ode does not provoke, even less satisfy such curiosity, nor does it let us overhear Keats in person.⁴⁵

40. James O'Rourke 66-68. Along the same lines Grant Scott finds: "The narrative logic of temporary progression (Lessing's prerequisite for poetry) collapses and the spatial simultaneity of the urn's frieze takes over. The entire stanza threatens to grind to a halt as narrative; the speaker stutters and froths in an ecstasy of identification with the urn's lovers. . ." (137). Susan Wolfson concedes that "repetition becomes a figure of an imagination under stress" (*The Questioning Presence* 321).

41. Martin Aske: "In its rage for identification the poet's overrepresented discourse violates the decorum of the image as a pleasant object and will indeed cause the heart to be left 'high-sorrowful.' . . . rapture turns into melancholy" (120). Earl Wasserman tries to save "all breathing human passion" in a *unio mystica* and not to leave it "below": "The tendency of the reader's mind is to smooth out the syntax: the passion of the lovers, it half feels, is far above human passion and distinct from it. And yet Keats' intention is to say precisely that the love is 'all breathing human passion far above,' for this is the syntactical analogue of the mystic oxymoron" (39-40). However, Wasserman admits a "stumbling" of the poet, an ambiguity which allows the union to disintegrate into a "far above" and the experience in this world. A review of readings and interpretations of the phrase "all breathing human passion far above" is given in Susan Wolfson's *The Questioning Presence* 322-23.

42. Jack Stillinger, *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Keats's Odes. A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1968).

43. Paul D. Sheats (95) still finds in the poem the "age-old and enduring question, 'is ideal art preferred to nature, or vice versa?'"—but admits that the poem declines to answer.

44. Cleanth Brooks, "The Artistry of Keats: A Modern Tribute," in *The Major English Romantic Poets: A Symposium in Reappraisal*, ed. C. D. Thorpe et al. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1957) 246-51, rpt. in Stillinger 98-103).

45. Jack Stillinger believes that the poem lets him eavesdrop on Keats: "For biographical

As the poem proceeds, the activities which suggested happiness are superseded by a scene which, while presenting the festiveness of a communal sacrifice, suggests desolation, victimization, down to details like the "peaceful citadel" the peace of which reverberates with the threat of war for which a citadel, after all, provides.⁴⁶ The urn's presentations now extend beyond the state of bliss. If the image of the lowing heifer intimates to Paul Fry (256) another unheard melody then this is certainly not a sweet one. Reverting to the questioning of the first stanza, the speaker is not satisfied with what the urn's frieze presents but supplements the scene of the sacrificial procession to the green altar⁴⁷ with the conjectural "little town by river or sea-shore, or mountain-built." The threefold option is another comment on the advantage of literary as against visual presentation. Literary art can propose three versions of the little town's site; visual presentation, short of giving three different pictures, would have to decide where to situate it. The extension of the poem's vista beyond what the urn exhibits overrules the limitations of ekphrasis as a, however fictive, description of a given work of art. In an act of "ekphrastic rivalry"⁴⁸ a sample of verbal *poesis* not subservient to a preceding sculptural *poesis* is inserted. This allows a fleeting glimpse into the poet's workshop. For once the speaker practices what is otherwise the poet's privilege, which, in reverse, amounts to a Hitchcockian cameo appearance of the poet in the guise of the speaker. There is a difference, however, between the poet devising the sculpted urn and the speaker's invention. The latter is equivocal. It may suggest a little town⁴⁹ and it may suggest the picture of a little town, an imagined addition to the urn's frieze. The town is temporarily silent as its inhabitants have left for the procession and will be back by evening or next morning. As an image, however, the deserted little town is frozen in its desolation. The silent rendering of actual silence—more so than the previous metamorphosis of heard melodies into unheard ones—invites the equivocation of two spheres and a conflation of the world of history and

matter, there is the spectacle of Keats speaking personally to the Urn or the Nightingale" ("The 'story' of Keats," in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats* 258).

46. Jack Stillinger would take the phrase as a "starting point for an essay on (say) 'The Ominous Politics of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*'" ("The 'story' of Keats" 258).

47. The "green altar" is frequently, e.g. by H. Vendler (122) and by M. Krieger (18), counted among the items not given in the urn's frieze, a reading which ignores the indication of the verb "come": People are coming, not going, to the altar in question, which must therefore be on the scene.

48. Theresa M. Kelley's term in "Keats, Ekphrasis, and History," in N. Roe, ed., *Keats and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) 223.

49. Miriam Allott ("John Keats," in *British Writers*, gen. ed. Ian Scott-Kilvert, vol. 4 [New York: Scribner's Sons, 1981] 223) opts for this possibility.

the world of art. In previous stanzas a confusion of both sides of the mirror of representation brought about the perturbation of a charmed victim of art's delusive power. In stanzas two and three the speaker was intrigued, puzzled and duped by the paradoxes he himself conjured up by his mixing with the marble creatures of the Greek artist, insisting on their timeless existence and at the same time insinuating life and a temporal continuum. Now, in stanza four, the speaker has progressed from dizzying entanglement to a stance of intellectual control, even sophistication, displaying Romantic wit and irony.⁵⁰ Intersecting the level of reality with the level of semblance he sees the town desolate because its inhabitants have moved into the sphere of art from which there is no return: an Attic Hamelin Town.⁵¹ The complaint that not a soul can return to tell that not a soul can return adds to the absurdity of the surrealist joke and superadds the notion of the revenant, the Gothic figure of the returnee who cannot return. The aesthetic sphere throws its spell over the historical world, the little town, and assimilates it to its timeless state.

Many critics discover in this stanza's reference to a little town, which is not actually pictured on the urn, the poem's reaching out to historical reality, a break-through to a new dimension. Here, it is alleged, the poem achieves its genuine identity which has been thwarted up to this stanza by the speaker's fixation on the urn's figures. In addition, the engagement in historical reality and its temporal dimension is said to bring about the poem's turn to narrativity.⁵² Such interpretations attempt to recruit the

50. The notion of romantic irony is introduced by Douglas Wilson who sees the opposing poles of romantic irony in a "dialectic between the permanence of an urn and the absent life implied by its imitative forms" ("Reading the Urn: Death in Keats's Arcadia," *SEL* 25 [1985]: 823-44 [823]).

51. H. Vendler senses this when she states that the "mysterious priest has something of the folk-tale force of a pied piper" (125). William Empson (*The Structure of Complex Words* [London: Chatto and Windus, 1952]) gives a concise diagnosis: "These people's homes will be left desolate because they have gone to make a piece of art-work. . ." (374). W. J. Bate adds a historic dimension: "It is not simply because the figures are forever imprisoned on the urn that no one can ever return to the empty town but because the actual inhabitants disappeared in the remote past—a past from which no one remains except as figures on an urn or in other works of art" (80). Theresa Kelley sees the town under the aesthetic spell, points out that "the urn will forever hold the inhabitants of an entire town captive and leave that town empty and, as it were, suspended in the urn's eternal, lyric time" (230), yet holds on to her preconceived idea that here the poem manages to bypass the urn for a direct reference to historical reality, manifesting its "restless historical consciousness that is critical of the urn's willingness to suspend time in order to make pictures" (223).

52. K. S. Calhoun thinks that in stanza 4 the work of art assumes the "semblance of being natural" by considering past and future, destination and provenance, "the return to nature marking the reclamation of art by time" (13). Grant Scott disregards the pictorial synchronicity of procession, altar awaiting it, and empty little town, and invents a time sequence alien to the poem: "He [the speaker] extends the eternal present of the urn's frieze forward

poem for historicist discourse. Temporality is the shibboleth which a poem has to master in order to be worth considering. A variant of the historicist approach is offered by James O'Rourke who, while critical of the McGann school, also sees the poem coming into its own in stanza four, no longer idolizing the "sentimental beauty" of illusionary art but presenting "a beauty that is real." The rhetoric of temporality is extended to that of allegory which this stanza is said to offer.⁵³ The lack of evident allegory is made up by the critic's allegorizations: For O'Rourke the empty town "becomes an image for the final destiny of these figures who vanish into the abyss of time," a conceit in the wake of Wasserman's earlier invention of a pilgrim's progress, a "passage of souls from the world-town to a heaven-altar, from which there is no return" (43)—a construct which provoked mocking remarks from Leo Spitzer (80, n. 12). Helen Vendler's remark that the procession is invested "with the weight of life's mysteries of whence and whither" (125) is another instance of the allegorizing approach.

Both ways of inculcating a historical dimension, a straightforward one or an allegorized one, disregard the fact that the inspection of the frieze continues in this stanza and that the poem continues exploring the effects and perplexities of representation, notably the interplay of temporal event and still image. By missing the joke about the exodus of the little town's community through the looking-glass of art and seeing the poem open a door out to historical reality critics are in fact victims of the joke.⁵⁴ Temporality has been on the poem's agenda all along, in the mythological and pastoral scene of previous stanzas as well as in the scene from communal life in the fourth. Rather than invent a sudden shift in the poem—or its speaker—from being under the spell of images to being aware of historical reality one might pay attention to the poem's persistent negotiation of the representational relation, which juxtaposes the temporal and atemporal modes of ex-

into the future (the priest leading the heifer to the altar) and backward into the past (the empty town), Keats becomes a historian himself, creating an imaginative history that does not rely for its material on either mythology or fact. . . . As he writes the frieze into time, the observer begins to rival the urn's power of story telling" (142). Along similar lines James O'Rourke argues: "The poem reclaims its poetic authority in the fourth stanza, in which it moves further away from the constraint of simply reproducing imagery borrowed from the urn. . . . In the most evocative imagery of the stanza, the 'little town' that is 'emptied of its folk, this pious morn,' the ode achieves its greatest poetic power precisely as it realizes the ability denied to the urn itself, the ability to construct the temporal form of a 'tale'" (69).

53. O'Rourke: "Keats's town, forevermore silent and desolate, is an exemplary figure of Benjaminian allegory, in which 'the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* [death mask] of history as a petrified primordial landscape" (71).

54. Froma Zeitlin acutely observes the interlocking of the two spheres ("On Ravishing Urns: Keats in His Tradition," in *Rape and Representation*, ed. Lynn A. Higgins & Brenda R. Silver [New York: Columbia UP, 1991] 278–302 [290]).

istence. This attention may bring about an awareness not only of the poem's historical sensibility but also of the Romantic poem as a historical phenomenon. The poem's reflecting on art's vampiric power of draining life and assimilating the victim to its own mode of existence, oscillating between ideality and an uncanny "apparitioning," may be a valid contribution towards a definition of the Romantic moment in history.

The fifth stanza—perhaps following the cue given by the last syllable of the fourth stanza's last word, the only appearance of the sequence "urn" in the poem⁵⁵—resumes the invocatory pose, incidentally the rhyme pattern, too,⁵⁶ of the first stanza and, in one respect, confers symmetry on the poem, in another respect breaks the poem up by practically restarting it. The restart is remarkable for the poem's or the speaker's change of attitude. At last he faces the urn again. He is still aware of the sculpted frieze, but its pastoral scenes now stand in metonymically for the urn, the "Cold Pastoral." He has extricated himself from his absorption in the world of the urn's relief and resumes the odic invocations of the first stanza, even venturing the odic "O." But now he is on different terms with the urn. Gone are the metaphoric transfigurations. With "Attic shape" the poem comes closest to calling the urn an urn. The mocking sound of the paronomasia "fair attitude" somewhat dilutes the factuality of the new approach,⁵⁷ but sticks to the facts, the Attic provenance and character of the urn, risking a pun rather than resorting to an awkward "fair Atticness." The new approach is firmly established in the—at last and for the first time—factual description of the artefact. The urn's figures are now recognized as "marble men and maidens." Silence, formerly turned by a troping fancy into a foster-parent, is now simply attributed to "form," a term which recalls scholarly rather than poetic diction. "Cold Pastoral" acknowledges the quality of the artefact which has previously been ignored. "Pastoral" is the technical term for the genre in question. All in all, the fifth stanza brings a thorough revision of the previous performance, even an invalidation of the four previous stanzas. Invalid and inappropriate, so the final stanza's verdict, was the previous approach to the urn, the absorption into the world of representation and the neglect of truly aesthetic judgment. Involved in logical puzzles and equivocations, first as victim, then as master, at times indulging in an affective consumption, even consummation, of the picture-frieze, the speaker had lost sight of the urn. Now, he shows a new regard for the urn, contem-

55. As G. Scott points out (138).

56. Wasserman points this out (47).

57. William Empson disapproves of this "very bad line; the half pun suggesting a false Greek derivation and jammed against an arty bit of Old English seems to be affected and ugly; it is the sort of thing that the snobbish critics of his own time called him a Cockney for" (374).

plating instead of inquiring. Above all, he introduces the concept of beauty—with the word “fair” in the stanza’s first line, eventually in the urn’s message. The revision of the last stanza is a new vision, an aesthetic vision. At last the urn figures as a thing of beauty. It is the speaker’s new insight that the encounter with the work of art was foiled as long as the aesthetic judgment of its beauty was displaced by usage—intellectual or emotional. However, he does not remain in an attitude of adoration and aesthetic appreciation. Eventually his newly won attitude is cast into knowledge presented as the urn’s teaching, articulated by the speaker: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.” By this dictum and the confirmatory comment on it the poem stands corrected and redeemed. After a process of erring and mistaking it has eventually worked out its aesthetic salvation. Or, has it?

The message itself is by no means as vapid as detractors would have us believe, nor is it in need of a silly scatological joke in order to reveal its meaning.⁵⁸ The point it makes may have been blunted by ubiquitous use,⁵⁹ yet it governs the idealistic aesthetics of the Romantic era, most explicitly in F. W. J. Schelling’s *System of Transcendental Idealism*, which, through the mediation of S. T. Coleridge, was brought into the English discourse on art, aesthetics and the imagination. Schelling appoints, in an ontologizing development of the function of the power of judgment in Kant’s *Critique*,⁶⁰ the production of the beautiful work of art as the anticipation of what philosophy aspires to establish: truth. In the final section of *System* Schelling states that

58. Kenneth Burke: “. . . we could say that *one* of the meanings we quickly discern in “beauty” is “body,” while “truth” could be joyced meaningfully by a metathesis of two letters and the substitution of a cognate for one of the consonantal sounds” (*A Rhetoric of Motives* [Berkeley: U of California P, 1969] 204).

59. Ian Jack: “There is no end to the parallels that have been cited, from Plato to Hazlitt, from Boileau’s ‘Rien n’est beau que le vrai . . . to Shaftesbury’s ‘all Beauty is Truth’” (287, n. 42). And there are, of course, Keats’s own pronouncements—the often quoted “I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart’s affections and the truth of the imagination. What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be Truth, whether it existed before or not . . .” (*Letters* 1: 29); or, “I never can feel certain of any truth but from a clear perception of its Beauty, and I find myself very young minded, even in that perceptive power (imagination) which I hope will increase” (*Letters* 1: 93). James O’Rourke (53–55) gives a survey of the contemporary debate in which the collocation “truth/beauty” was by no means unusual—with Hazlitt as the main proponent of a Schellingian perspective in which “to the genuine artist, truth, nature, beauty are almost different names for the same thing” (*CW* 4: 265). Thomas McFarland (202–3) emphasizes, with reference to Schelling, the philosophical solidity of the dictum.

60. Cf. the programmatic exposition of the mediating function of the aesthetic judgment in Kant’s “Second Introduction” (“II: On the domain of philosophy in general”) to *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

it is self evident that art is at once the only true and eternal organ and document of philosophy. . . . Art is paramount to the philosopher, precisely because it opens to him, as it were, the holy of holies, where burns in eternal and original unity, as if in a single flame, that which in nature and history is rent asunder, and in life and action, no less than in thought, must forever fly apart. . . .

Philosophy was born and nourished by poetry in the infancy of knowledge, and with it all those sciences it has guided to perfection; we may thus expect them, on completion, to flow back like so many individual streams into the universal ocean of poetry from which they took their source. . . .⁶¹

Hegel affirms the truth of beauty when, in the introduction to his *Aesthetics*, he states that "art's vocation is to unveil the truth in the form of sensuous artistic configuration."⁶² The urn's dictum can be seen in close propinquity to Hegel's central definition of the concept of beauty as "das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee," the "sensuous appearance of the idea."⁶³

Now we said that beauty is Idea, so beauty and truth are in one way the same. Beauty, namely must be true in itself. But looked at more closely, the true is nevertheless distinct from the beautiful. That is to say, what is true is the Idea, the Idea as it is in accordance with its inherent character and universal principle, and as it is grasped as such in thought. . . . Now, when truth in this its external existence is present to consciousness immediately, and when the Concept remains immediately in unity with its external appearance, the Idea is not only true but beautiful. Therefore the beautiful is characterized as the pure appearance of the Idea to sense. (I: III)

Hegel's careful distinction states the identity of beauty and truth "in one way" (*einer Seits*) yet does not admit reciprocity, truth not exhausting itself in beauty but coming into its own as thought. The urn's chiasmic assertion of the identity of beauty and truth, truth and beauty, seems to override such reservation and therefore expose itself to questions as to its tenability, though the slight disturbance of the chiasm—the sylleptic omission of the second "is"—has been read as indicating a non-reciprocity.⁶⁴ The com-

61. F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. by P. Heath (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1978) 231–32.

62. *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975) 1: 55.

63. Rendered in Knox's translation as "the pure appearance of the Idea to sense."

64. Helmut Viebrock (*Die Anschauungen von John Keats über Dichter und Dichtung nach seinen Briefen, Essays und Gedichten* [Marburg, 1946]) points out a difference in the validity of

mentary, in any case, shifts the issue of truth in a Hegelian fashion from the confines of beauty to its epistemic homeland. With this move the assertion of identity pronounced in the maxim is again subject to the criterion of truth in the commentary's emphasis on knowing. Taken as knowledge, the definition of truth as beauty may not be true after all, or, in a historical dimension, it may have passed its moment of truth, the epoch of classical *Kunstreligion*.

The qualification of the urn's dictum as sufficient knowledge relegates both the urn's dictum and the urn's commentary on it to the status of a possibly superannuated and self-serving wisdom, from which the poem may very well distance itself. And what authenticates the dictum as the urn's wisdom in the first place? The imputation of the dictum as the urn's direct utterance is proposed by interpretations, which, supported by the officious editorial act of hedging the two lines in quotation marks,⁶⁵ attempt to isolate the urn's message from the poem in order to keep the latter free from "aestheticist teaching" or to keep it at an ironic distance.⁶⁶ Such interpretations establish the very sphere of aestheticist irresponsibility which these critics denounce. Meaning to demonstrate a no-nonsense realism they indeed fall for the delusion of a speaking urn—in Spitzer's words "a Grecian miracle"—whilst the poem realistically counts on the mediation of a speaker. This, of course, complicates the issue. If the speaker lends his voice to the urn, why not his words, in a ventriloquist fashion?⁶⁷ Then, who is talking?

One way of attributing the final pronouncement to the silent urn is to

the two parts of the chiasm, registering in the assertion "truth beauty" a desperate claim rather than an established truth, a claim which may require transcending the notion of beauty to that of the sublime (87f.). Eckhard Lobsien ("Poetisches Denken," contribution to "John Keats's Odes. Symposium to Honour Ulrich Keller," University of Frankfurt, 11/12 July 2003) resumes the discussion, finding truth extrapolated from its identification with beauty into the sphere of knowledge which may not affirm the truth of the dictum. William Empson in *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1951) devotes a section of his chapter 19, "A is B" (350–374) to the issue.

65. Douglas Bush's punctuation of the passage in *John Keats. Selected Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958) was meant to consolidate the Harvard critics' endeavor to deny the allegedly aestheticist dictum the speaker's or the poet's support.

66. John Strachan: "Much discussion of the poem has focused on its last two lines, in which the urn speaks directly to mankind" (*A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on the Poems of John Keats* [London: Routledge, 2003] 152). Paul H. Fry reads the last lines as "unequivocally ironic" (256). G. Scott (149) sees the effect of the ventriloquist entwining of speaker and urn in an ironic invalidation.

67. The ventriloquist mode of the final pronouncement was pointed out by David Perkins (*The Quest for Permanence. The Symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1959] 242) and is consistently assumed by G. Scott.

assume it being written on the urn's body, with the speaker acting as the reader of the inscription. What the title of the Ode suggested may at last have come true—in a modest, yet credible, version. A Romantic ode written on a Grecian urn would have been a preposterous proposition. An epigram written on a Grecian urn, however, may be acceptable even to the fastidious reader. The "leaf-fringed legend" of the first stanza may in this case be read as a first reference to the inscription, although this would raise the question why the speaker could not read it right away—granting the poetic licence of an English text on an Attic urn.

The epigram inscribed on the urn would have to be attributed to Keats's poetic invention. The evidence of archaeology and art history⁶⁸ hardly supports the assumption. The urns which, according to Ian Jack, may have been of influence on Keats's imaginary construct—the Portland Vase, the Towneley Vase, the Vase of Sosibios, the Borghese Vase, the Holland House Urn—do not bear inscriptions. Ian Jack suggests that Keats could have got the idea of an inscripted urn from painted vases, though he soon dismisses this suggestion.⁶⁹ The suggestion is, nevertheless, worth considering, though it should not make us forget that the poem's urn is a marble one with a sculpted frieze, not a ceramic vase.⁷⁰ Inscriptions on ceramic

68. Useful evidence is concisely presented by Ulrich Sinn, "Beschriftete Bilder auf griechischen Vasen" in *Schrift, Sprache, Bild und Klang. Entwicklungsstufen der Schrift von der Antike bis in die Neuzeit*, catalogue of a special exhibition of the Fakultät für Altertums- und Kulturwissenschaft der Universität Würzburg et. al. (Würzburg: Ergon, 2002) 73–84. A look through the microcatalogue in the appendix to Rudolf Wachter, *Non-Attic Greek Vase Inscriptions* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), is another way of ascertaining the improbability of vase inscriptions which could be a type for the ode's last lines. True, the evidence is that of non-Attic vases, but there is no reason to expect different evidence from Attic vases. Cf. also J. D. Beazley, *Attic Black-figure Vase-painters* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1956) and *Attic Red-figure Vase-painters*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1963). D. A. Amyx (*Corinthian Vase-painting of the Archaic Period* [Berkeley: U of California P, 1988]) refers to inscriptions as "scrappy material": "As to their content, nearly all inscriptions on Corinthian vases are simply labels, identifying the personages mythological or human, beside whom they are written" (548).

69. "If Keats knew the introduction to Henry Moses's *Collection of Antique Vases*, he will have read there that inscriptions 'are often found' on painted vases, and that they sometimes contain 'a moral sentiment'" (223). ". . . it is tempting to consider the possibility that Keats was in fact thinking of one of them [black-figured and red-figured vases]; and if what he had in mind was an engraving, the transmutation (conscious or unconscious) to marble would have been easily made. But two facts tell against this. One is simply that no painted vase with the two scenes in question has yet been adduced. The other is that it would have been unusual (at least) to call a painted vase an 'urn' at this time" (284, n. 20).

70. This is carelessly being overlooked by commentators: Stuart Peterfreund talks about the "clay sides of the urn" ("The Truth about 'Beauty' and 'Truth': Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' Milton, Shakespeare, and the Uses of Paradox," *Keats-Shelley-Journal* 35 [1986]: 62–82 [66]). Jack Stillinger ("The 'story' of Keats" 255) speaks of the "painted surface . . . of the urn," as does Laurence S. Lockridge ("Keats: The Ethics of Imagination," in J. R. Barth

urns or vases of the classical period of the 6th century are a regular occurrence. Yet they are mostly names written vertically alongside figures, potters' and painters' signatures and dedications, exhortations and animations—for instance to drink. Topically closest to the maxim on Keats's urn are the *kalos*-inscriptions.⁷¹ To the modern eye these inscriptions give the impression of a balloon in a cartoon, as Ulrich Sinn suggests, or of graffiti scribbled in the interstices between various figures. They are certainly not calligraphic bands running round the urn. Nor is there any example of a programmatic statement like the one of Keats's poem, not to mention the modernity of the statement though this may be defended as vaguely Platonic or, rather, Plotinic.⁷² And, of course, it will be difficult to retrieve a classical Greek vase with an inscription in English. So, the assumption of an inscription on the urn in Keats's ode is not as obvious as is often maintained with more confidence than evidence.⁷³

Moreover, assuming an actual inscription on the urn would require a

& J. L. Mahoney, eds., *Coleridge, Keats, and the Imagination. Romanticism and Adam's Dream. Essays in Honor of Walter Jackson Bate* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1990) 162). John Strachan writes of Keats's "rich descriptions . . . painted on the urn" (151).

71. Attic vases frequently display a name or noun predicated by the adjective *kalos*, e.g. "Rhodon is beautiful"—"The boy is beautiful"—"Leagros is beautiful."

72. See C. M. Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination* (London: Oxford UP, 1950).

73. The confidence, though, tends to be rather shaky in most cases when an inscription is assumed in one sentence and the assumption is retracted or modified in the next. Leo Spitzer, for instance, has it both ways, seeing the urn, "in a Grecian miracle or metamorphosis, [coming] to *speak* to them [its beholders] . . . its inscriptions . . ." (91), but eventually only claims a "correspondence between the final lines of the ode and the Greek practice of inscribing sepulchral monuments. . ." (93, n. 18). David Bromwich finds the speaker reading the dictum from the urn's surface, but, on second thought, perceives the dictum as what the "urn, after his [the speaker's] experience of it, might be supposed to say by inscription" (256). Walter Jackson Bate thinks that the "final two lines are in the vein of the inscriptions on Greek monuments addressed to the passing stranger" (517), but shortly afterwards makes reference to the urn's "inscriptional message" (518). J. McGann modifies an initial assertion that the poem refers to an inscription into a peculiar assumption: "Indeed, we are probably meant to take the poem's famous Beauty-Truth apothegm not as the urn's actual inscription (translated, perhaps?) but as Keats's substitute for an inscription which had grown too faded to be read any longer. . . . [T]hose characters (in both senses) are illegible, yet Keats's poetic urn can still speak, as if it were some literalized example of the idea of a poem as a speaking picture" ("Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism," *MLN* 94 (1979): 988–1032 [1010–11]). James Heffernan somewhat diplomatically says "the speaker finds no inscription on the urn, or at least none he can read" (111). G. Scott adopts this assumption of an—at first—unreadable inscription: "Keats's speaker . . . cannot make out the inscription that surrounds it" (16). . . . He can neither identify its host of characters nor make out the inscription that might possibly lend him a clue in his endeavour" (136). Scott then identifies the final dictum with that previously unreadable "leaf-fring'd legend" (147), though he does not insist and reverts to the option of the speaker's ventriloquizing.

severing of the brief apothegm from the comment "that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know," which can hardly be meant to crowd the urn's surface in addition. Such a splitting has indeed been considered by those who read the comment as the speaker's patronizing remark made to the urn or as the speaker's exhortation directed to the audience.⁷⁴ The first option⁷⁵ implies a change in the pronoun from "thou" to "ye" which cannot be accounted for. The second option,⁷⁶ a sudden turning of the speaker to the audience, would break the circumference which has until then contained speaker and urn. Both options look contrived in comparison to the conventional understanding of the last two lines as the speaker proposing or reciting the urn's message, which has been intimated to him by means other than writing.

The epigrammatic character of the two final lines is untouched by either the acceptance or the rejection of the assumption of an inscription. This assumption, though difficult to maintain, does not make much difference. It just adds one more intermediary, the epigrammatist, who created the fiction of a speaking urn and puts the speaker into the role of a reader. The speaker maintains his mediating function in any case, whether reading or imputing or ventriloquizing the urn's fictive utterance⁷⁷—ventriloquism being an upgrading of what is deceptively called "direct speech," speech which is never direct but will have to be cited by a borrowed voice.

In the Ode the speaker articulates what the silent urn does not pronounce.⁷⁸ He puts into words what the Grecian urn is supposed to intimate

74. Jack Stillinger, in an appendix to his collection of essays (113–14) gives a useful overview of the possible options. Marjorie Garber presents an assortment of stances taken on this point in publications on Keats's Ode and points out the ineradicable tendency to decontextualize the final aphorism into an absolute saw, a—in I. A. Richard's term—"pseudo-statement" (" "[Quotation Marks]," in S. I. Salamensky, ed., *Talk, Talk, Talk: The Cultural Life of Everyday Conversation* [London: Routledge, 2001] 121–46).

75. Suggested by Theresa M. Kelley (230).

76. Earl Wasserman reads the final one and a half lines as the speaker's—in his understanding, Keats's—comment on the entire preceding sentence, a consolatory assurance that "art is forever available as 'a friend to man'" (59–60), pronouncing its dictum which can only be accepted as art's message, not as common wisdom: "The knowledge that in art this insight is forever available is the height of earthly wisdom; and it is all man needs to know, for it endows his earthly existence with a meaning and a purpose" (61–62). This reading has been resolutely rejected by Spitzer (83–95). J. O'Rourke (82) chooses this option in order to have the dictum endorsed by the speaker and so to rebut an ironic understanding of the final message as the urn's aestheticist pronouncement.

77. Froma I. Zeitlin thinks of an act of ventriloquized reading, the ventriloquist following the script on the urn (280 & 292).

78. M. H. Abrams: ". . . he (the speaker) attributes to the Urn a statement about beauty and truth which is actually a thought that the Urn evokes in him" ("Belief and the Suspension of Disbelief," in Stillinger 110–11 [110]). Helen Vendler sees the poem's speaker as the mediator and articulator of the urn's message: "The last two lines are spoken by the urn,

non-verbally to human beings of any language. The confrontation of linguistic particularity and visual art's universality is another implicit comment on the respective merits and shortcomings of the sister arts.⁷⁹ The final two lines are indeed the speaker's articulation of the urn's aesthetic impact on him. It is in his mind—or, if one insists on an inscription after all, in the epigrammatist's mind—that the urn's impact is processed into knowledge and verbal expression. How far his mind gives assent to what it has understood and learned remains an open question.

So, the validity of the Ode's final lines is not settled. To acknowledge and accept their teaching on the authority of the mediator is as inconsiderate as the assumption of a silent urn's direct speech. It is not the weakness of that authority—though the speaker's record in this respect is poor considering his previous performance—but the structural arrangement of the poem's ending which unsettles the confidence in the validity of the final lines. The grammar of quotation, by bringing about the ventriloquist convolution of speaker and urn, establishes an uncanny elusiveness. The speaker can shirk responsibility by insisting that he is just citing. The urn, on the other hand, need not have anything to do with what is being ascribed to it. The speaker speaks, but does not say anything. The urn has its say and saw, but does not speak. Both mutually implicate each other, the speaker pronouncing the urn's say, the urn saying what the speaker speaks. At the same time the arrangement provides for mutual disavowal, for a suspended authorship and lack of authority of the final lines.

This suspension leaves the conclusion of the poem in a state of inconclusiveness. The poem's main argument, the confrontation of and contest between the sister arts, has not really moved beyond the constellation indicated in the title, but has developed towards greater intricacy. The closure of the poem, so ostensibly achieved in a final apothegm, turns out to be deceptive. The assumption of a reconciliation of the two sides, "a marriage

which places special emphasis on the mottolike epigram before going on to comment on its unique worth. But the whole last sentence of the poem is the sentence of the speaker who, in his prophecy, recounts what the urn will say to succeeding generations" (134). G. Friedman calls the urn's speech "clearly staged and attributed by the speaker to it." As to the urn's words, "he says she says them" (236). G. Scott: "Keats's final act of ventriloquism at least in part, then, becomes an assertion of control and assures the speaker's victory. The poet puts words into the urn's mouth, forcing it out of its embattled silence and into a medium that is alien to it. . ." (149).

79. Haydon proposes in an essay printed in *Annals* 4: 241–42, that "what painting does the world can comprehend, poets speak to full effect only to their own nation." J. O'Rourke comments that "this argument informs Keats's emphasis on the silence of the urn, as well as his final gesture, which has often struck critics as paradoxical, of making the urn speak. Such a turn would, even in Haydon's terms, be part of the natural province of the poet" (63).

between the urn, plastic art, beauty, the "unravished bride of quietness"—and the poem, poetic art, truth, the master of verbal expression" (Bromwich 249) does not have the poem's support. True, a common ground is established by the fact that the contest is conducted in the literary medium of the ode, but this common ground is an arena of controversy rather than a scene of atonement. It gives the advantage to poetry, and right from the start it has been the poem's endeavor to draw the urn into a communion grounded in language, ascribing to it the capacity of hearing, prospectively of speaking. The invocation which opens the Ode is the first assault on the integrity of the "still unravished bride of quietness," disregarding the urn's existence as a thing of beauty beyond the reach of communicative intimacy. As a "sylvan historian" the urn is meant to share in the speaker's task of telling a tale. At the same time, notably in the prevarication of the title,⁸⁰ the poem is awed by the urn's aloofness beyond the reach of verbal communication, the "silent form" which "teases us out of thought" and, by implication, out of speech. A dialectic which never attains the closure of sublation pursues the poetic integration of the urn into the poem and, conversely, a self-transcendence of the poem to the urn's aesthetic mode. True, the poem is animated by an aspiration identified by Murray Krieger as the "ekphrastic principle," the aspiration toward the plasticity and spatiality of pictorial art, a *Gebildehaftigkeit* which is the genuine and ultimate manifestation of the *Einbildungskraft*, the Romantic dream of classical art. The dream of the statuesque poem is, however, countervailed by the critical awareness that its fruition would amount to a liquidation of poetry. For poetry to attain the status of the work of visual art means self-effacement. The *ut pictura poesis* sounds the death knell to the literariness of poetry. This awareness works against the ekphrastic principle. It energizes the poem's self-assertion and its effort to overcome the urn's remoteness and self-containment. It tries to disprove—or to ignore—and in fact confirms the incompatibility of art and communicative language.

The last stanza resumes the dialectic manoeuver with tactical cunning. It re-emphasizes the bride's stillness by addressing the "silent form" in order to pull the ventriloquist's trick of making the urn at once speak and keep its silence. The urn's lack of speech creates the gap which the speaker of the ode fills with the urn's dictum. This manoeuver leaves the urn in its remoteness and yet gives it presence in the poem. The confrontation of visual and literary art is being translated into the confrontation of two literary genres, which were already put on the agenda by the incongruous elements

80. Bromwich senses this: ". . . the urn *can* perhaps be captured and somehow contained, whether by description or moralizing commentary, and Keats's effort to avoid doing so begins with his title. To address his poem 'to' the urn would imply a degree of presumption about its identity; he writes merely 'on' it. . ." (246).

of the title announcing a poem to—an ode—and a poem on—an epigram.⁸¹ With this transposition the contest between the sister arts is conducted by proxy, as an inner-literary affair which seems bound to end with the poem prevailing. Once the urn is implicated in the poem by the ruse of prosopopoeic fiction, it seems to have lost the day. It is dislocated, not to say “disloquated” onto alien ground.⁸² Grant Scott, who, along with Geraldine Friedman, has done the most perceptive study of these negotiations, arrives at the conclusion that the urn’s threatening demonic power is eventually contained—“encapsulated”⁸³—by the ventriloquist stunt, “a verbal feint” and “a rhetorical trump Keats has kept up his sleeve all along.” He sums up: “In its imperial presence, the aphorism steals attention away from the urn (even as it borrows from its shape) and establishes its own rather powerful hegemony. Like Stevens’s jar . . . ‘it takes dominion everywhere.’ . . . It stands like a synecdoche in place of the urn, even though it is nominally what the urn says. Keats’s final act of ventriloquism at least in part, then, becomes an assertion of control and assures the speaker’s victory. The poet puts words into the urn’s mouth, forces it out of its embattled silence and into a medium that is alien to it” (148–49). Yet, this carefully argued diagnosis may be inappropriate, as Scott himself concedes when he ascribes the epigram’s effectiveness to its adaptive and mimetic strategy and observes how the urn asserts its otherness in the very epigram which supposedly tamed and contained it.⁸⁴ By imputing epigrammatic speech to the urn, the ode surrenders its final lines to the other genre and robs itself of its conclusion. It maintains its authority, yet invites a Trojan horse and the victory of the literary side turns out to be a Pyrrhic one. The poem’s victorious act of endowing the urn with speech reduces the poem to quoting this very endowment, to silencing its proper speech, i.e. to silencing itself. Insofar as the last words are the urn’s, characterized by the lapidary style of the—perhaps inscriptional—epigram, the balance is tipped toward the side

81. The relationship is perceptively studied by Geraldine Friedman, who sees the poem conducted in two modes, the sounding of voice and the silence of inscription, shifting “generically from an ode’s vocal celebration of its named object to an epitaph about and inscribed ‘on a Grecian Urn’” (241).

82. Heffernan observes: “By the very act of speaking, the urn crosses the line between visual and verbal representation, between the fixed silent beauty of graphic stillness and the audible movement of speech” (114–15).

83. “Keats encapsulates the urn in an epigram, labelling it, naming it, and returning it to the poise and timeless calm of the museum” (150).

84. “One could make a case for the iconic elements of the epigram outweighing the narrative ones, however. The phrase replicates the urn’s circular shape and also stands outside the language and poetics of the ode, just as the urn stands outside time. The phrase and its subsequent moral—‘that is. . .’—appear not to be susceptible to the vicissitudes of culture or aesthetic philosophy, reflecting instead the urn’s transcendence and universality” (204, n. 27).

of visual art. With the epigram it occupies the poem's space at the expense of the ode. The odic attitude which has up to now constituted the poem as an address and encounter, with the speaker invoking, questioning, and empathizing, is displaced by the authoritative stance in which the urn shows disdain for the speaker's previous interests and enquiries and overrules them with the instruction of what mankind needs to know. This outcome may count as the fruition of the "ekphrastic principle." The lapidary style of the last lines imparts the character of the urn to the poem's ending—the immutability and monumentality of the sculpted word.⁸⁵ Yet, this fulfilment comes as an intrusion which destroys what it is supposed to achieve. The poem ends in a quandary. The Ode is robbed of its formal generic integrity and thereby fails in its endeavor to win the contest of the sister arts by incorporating the virtues of visual art into the literary mode. The beauty of the sculpted poem is not attained. The urn, in turn, is excluded from the poem by the inclusion of its dictum. It is granted presence by representation, which is, as political science knows, the absence of the representee. The urn's verbal participation in the poem forfeits the urn's non-verbal power. The message which extols beauty, the urn's aesthetic effect, over the poem's discursive efforts is after all part of this discourse, a piece of knowledge. The urn is eventually made to produce knowledge instead of radiating beauty, which is referred to as something the poem does not contain nor achieve. Rendering the urn's defense of beauty is the poem's last and most articulate gesture of reverence towards the urn and, at the same time, its definitive act of warding off the urn's threat that the truth of beauty may brush away the poem's discursive endeavor or force poetry under its law of beauty. The Ode finally renounces, or represses, what may be its genuine desire: to be a well-wrought urn.

The latter option, which proposes a miraculous resolution of the poem's antagonism, has been widely embraced by critics—and readers in general—as the Ode's achievement.⁸⁶ Cleanth Brooks' ingenious borrowing for the

85. J. Heffernan: "... language assumes the juxtapositional effect of sculpture. Entering and envoicing the mute still object, language abandons its narrative impulse and gives itself up to the lasting suspension of visual art" (115)—a perceptive observation, which does, however, not establish Heffernan's preceding statement, "that visual and verbal representation are one." G. Scott formulates his concurrent observations in terms of literary period: "An example of symmetry and order, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' belongs in a line of Pope and Dryden rather than in a Romantic pose. Its neoclassical balance indicates a determined return to civilization, to a place governed by quantifiable rules and codes of behaviour. [. . . the aphorism] becomes itself an objet d'art about which we are continuously trying to write our own ekphrasis . . . our efforts to fill in with words the awful silence that the phrase produces" (149).

86. John Jones is most succinct: Keats "wants to write a Grecian Urn" (*Keats's Dream of Truth* [London: Chatto and Windus, 1969] 220).

title of his book was certainly an inducement, though Donne's conceit does not compare sonnet and urn, but urn and half-acre tombs.⁸⁷ The assumption, however, betrays the critic's belief in contaminative magic, a kind of voodoo poetics, according to which a round object makes a round poem.⁸⁸ The poem does not obey such magic. It is instructed by a knowledge which keeps visual and literary art distinct, against the desire for a union or assimilation. Along with such knowledge goes the poem's renouncing or forgoing beauty, not as a shortcoming or incidental failure; but as an acknowledgement of the poem's status as a literary text. This acknowledgement raises the question whether texts, even poetic ones, can be beautiful. This question radically unsettles the totalizing—perhaps totalitarian—ambition of aesthetic theories towards unifying the field of the arts under the jurisdiction of the aesthetic judgment. It may be that literary texts, whatever their inherent aspiration towards the aesthetic mode, are barred from the aesthetic sphere, the realm of beauty.

The poem's exclusion from that realm may as well be accounted for on historical grounds. The self-consciousness which both energizes and inhibits the Ode is sharpened not only by the confrontation of the sister arts but also by that of a Romantic ode with a Grecian urn, an encounter of *les anciens et les modernes*.⁸⁹ The apostrophe "O Attic shape" hails across the vast expanse of time. The Grecian urn is a manifestation of the truth of beauty

87. Brooks repeats the *quid pro quo* of urn and poem in inverse order when he calls the urn a "poem in stone" (139).

88. Leo Spitzer: "... the poem is circular or 'perfectly symmetrical' . . . thereby reproducing symbolically the form of the *objet d'art* which is its model" (72 f.). Paul H. Fry: ". . . he experiments with ekphrasis, the doctrine of containment by form, and tries by means of dialectic to imitate the roundure of the urn . . . begins with the most human metaphor for a circle that exists: the circle of art is addressed as if it were the family circle of man" (249). Geraldine Friedman thinks that "the 'Urn' enacts the same aesthetic unity as the urn" (230). Martin Aske, although he makes a case for the disposition of the poem in stanza two towards disintegration and fragmentation, states: "He [the poet] wants to write a Grecian urn" (110). Murray Krieger contends, in his original essay, that "the poem seeks to attain the 'shape' of the urn" in an "iconic attempt to shape itself in the form of its content" (*Ekphrasis* 269).

89. O'Rourke inspects (49–50) the historicist approaches which emphasize the historical location of the urn, respectively, of the poem's conclusion. Stuart Peterfreund points at the distance between Keats's own historical situation and the "golden and enchanted place known as Attic Greece" (65). Philip Fisher observes the urn's "cultural lateness" (90). Douglas Wilson directs our attention to "the historic gap between Keats and the Hellenic culture when such urns were made" ("Reading the Urn: Death in Keats's Arcadia," *SEL* 25 [1985]: 823–44 [829]). A. W. Pinney points out the "impossibility of recreating the Greek ideal in the modern world" ("Keats in the Museum: Between Aesthetics and History," *JEGP* 90 [1991]: 208–29 [213–14]). A study of the historical consciousness pervading Keats's poems has been done by Diane Brotemarkle with chapter I, "Keats and Winckelmann's Ghost," setting the scene.

which the modern poem can only render as a message from a classical age that has passed. The positively beautiful modern poem would forfeit this truth. It would be beautiful at the expense of truth. Hegel's sentence that "Romantic art . . . turns its back on this [i.e. Greek antiquity's] summit of beauty" (I: 526 f.) applies to Keats's Ode. As a work of the modern age it has its authenticity in its no longer being beautiful, the "no longer" keeping a nostalgic connection to what has been relinquished.

Both the generic and the historic condition enjoin on the modern poem an abstention from mistaken attempts at a beautiful performance which would traduce it to mere prettiness. The "Ode on a Grecian Urn" abides by this injunction. It forgoes the self-contained stillness and beauty of the antique shape and proceeds by erratic steps and antics to its inconclusive conclusion. The title's prevarication is a first incidence of what is played out at the end. The ambiguous genitive in the phrase "bride of quietness" effects an indeterminacy as to whether the urn's silence is definitive or whether it can be broken. This indeterminacy corresponds with the poem's ambivalent attitude towards the urn's mode of existence to which it aspires and from which it tries to remove the urn. The ambivalence persists in the speaker's being enchanted by the still life of the urn's frieze and even marks his relation to his own activity of chanting an ode which he has a mind to relinquish for the stillness of a "ditty of no tone," eventually for an epigram, which, however, has to be written as part of the poetic text of an ode. Features other than these ambivalences disorganize the poem. The mistakes of the wrong addresses leave the poem unguided and unfocused and foil the consistency of an ode. Instead of being firmly anchored in an authority invoked, the poem disintegrates into a kaleidoscope of fragmented appeals: "ye soft pipes," "fair youth," "bold Lover," "Happy, happy boughs," "happy melodist," "happy love," "little town"—each of these apostrophes simulates the opening of an ode, producing a welter of little odic attempts. Judged by the criterion of the "complete," that is, the perfect and therefore beautiful poem, the second and the third stanzas have been called digressions and have been deemed dispensable.⁹⁰ To the poem as it stands they are not dispensable but part of the poem's jagged course which even strays into the abandon of its third stanza. The way in which the fifth stanza plays with the notion of symmetry and subverts it by restarting it mocks the concept of the beautifully balanced poem. The interference of the epigram finally impairs the Ode's generic integrity. The poem's ending in a stance oscillating between self-assertion and self-effacement

90. W. J. Bate calls the two stanzas "a digression": "We have only to apply the simple test of omitting them both, or else the third alone, and we find that what remains will still make a complete poem, though admittedly less rich" (514); David Bromwich has a similar remark, selecting stanzas 3 and 4 for omission (246).

sustains the nervously sophisticated character of the whole performance. The poem refutes its poetic success step by step and yet constructs itself through these very steps of self-destruction, builds itself up by ruining itself. Its achievement is its downfall, its downfall its success. In this condition it cannot—and does not—lay claim to the quality it awards to the urn: beauty. The “fair attitude” of the Attic shape is pointed out, not replicated, in the poem.

And yet—Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” has charmed and will charm readers into the persuasion of having read a beautiful poem. The last stanza’s acclamation of the urn’s beauty throws the impression of beauty like a veil over the poem which, not least by this same stanza’s manoeuvres, keeps its generic as well as historic distance from the manifestation of beauty. The poem’s claim to beauty is thoroughly exploded by its performance, and yet, like the condensation of a previously evaporated substance, a secondary beauty settles on the poem’s surface, spreading a bloom which suffices to win over the aesthetic judgment. This bloom may be taken to be a reflection of the poem’s desire which is denied fulfilment for generic and historic reasons. In this manner Keats’s ode exerts the power of a nostalgic reminder of a vanished condition which lends it an aura of beauty.

University of Frankfurt, Main

A vertical bar on the left side of the page, consisting of a series of colored squares (red, orange, yellow, green, blue) and a small red diamond at the top.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Keats's Ode to a Grecian Urn
SOURCE: Stud Romanticism 45 no2 Summ 2006
WN: 0619600507005

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher:
<http://www.bu.edu/cas/graduate/>

Copyright 1982-2006 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.