

## 6

## Keats in the Museum: Between Aesthetics and History – ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’

A. W. PHINNEY

Among the many readers of ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, Cleanth Brooks was the first to consider in any detail the poem’s portrayal of the urn as a historian. Yet, as the subtitle of his essay – ‘History without Footnotes’ – suggests, Brooks ultimately emphasises the urn’s universality, rather than its historical particularity. As a ‘Sylvan historian’ the urn tells only tales, rather than ‘formal history’, and it ‘certainly supplies no names and dates’. Indeed, in an especially paradoxical formulation, Brooks asserts that the urn’s ‘history is beyond time, outside time’. But this apparent lack of historical content is not a defect in his eyes, for the ‘autonomous world’ of the urn ‘comes to have a richer and more important history than that of actual cities’.<sup>1</sup>

Brooks’s own attitude concerning the relation between history and criticism is evident here. Just as the urn is said to ignore ‘names, dates, and special circumstances’ (p. 164), so Brooks reads the poem without reference to its historical context. As he argues in a later chapter of *The Well Wrought Urn*, ‘to treat the poems discussed primarily as poems is a proper emphasis, and very much worth doing. For we have gone to school to the anthropologists and the cultural historians assiduously, and we have learned their

132

KEATS IN THE MUSEUM 133

lesson almost too well’ (p. 215). If there is to be a discipline that is a specifically *literary* criticism, rather than merely a branch of some other discipline such as history or sociology or anthropology, then one must be able to define an aesthetic structure that remains essentially the same over time, a ‘formal pattern’ that ‘seems to carry over from poem to poem’ and that allows us ‘to approach a poem by Donne in the same general terms through which we approach a poem by Keats’ (p. 218). Like the urn, poetry must embody certain qualities that transcend history.<sup>2</sup>

From another perspective, then, we might say that both ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ and Brooks’s reading of it participate in the same ideological illusion. For such faith in the transhistorical nature of art can be shown to be itself historically conditioned. By the Romantic period, art has become an ornamental commodity whose value must be justified in a utilitarian society. The poet and the critic affirm the timeless iconicity of art precisely because art has lost its immediate relevance to the history of its time. ‘The relative dissociation of the work of art from the praxis of life in bourgeois society thus becomes transformed into the (erroneous) idea that the work of art is totally independent of society.’<sup>3</sup> Christopher Caudwell’s *Illusion and Reality* offers a good example of how this analysis has been applied to Keats:

Keats is the first great poet to feel the strain of the poet’s position in this stage of the bourgeois illusion, as producer for the free market.... The poet now escapes upon the ‘rapid wings of poesy’ to a world of romance, beauty and sensuous life separate from the poor, harsh, real world of everyday life, which it sweetens and by its own loveliness silently condemns.... [This world] is the golden-gated upper world of Hyperion, the word-painted lands of the nightingale, of the Grecian urn, of Baiae’s isle. This other world is defiantly counterposed to the real world.

‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’ – that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

The poet now begins to show the marks of commodity production....  
The poem has become already an end in itself.<sup>4</sup>

By reframing the poem in this way we would not falsify Brooks’s reading, but we would be showing that the poem’s apparent affirmations about the relations between history and art, and the reiteration of these views in the New Criticism, are only instances of Romantic ideology. As Jerome McGann has argued. ‘The idea



that poetry, or even consciousness, can set one free of the ruins of history and culture is the grand illusion of every Romantic poet, an illusion that has continued to dominate subsequent criticism of the Romantics.<sup>5</sup>

Of course many scholars have defended Keats against this kind of critique by arguing that the poet himself recognised the impossibility, and, indeed, the undesirability, of escaping from the world of process, and that 'Grecian Urn' implies as much.<sup>6</sup> But I think we have yet to explore the extent to which the ode anticipates the very confrontation that has emerged in the history of its reading.<sup>7</sup> Keats's poem is not just concerned with the tensions between art and life; it also dramatises the conflicting claims of aesthetic criticism and historical critique in the understanding of a work of art. As I will be trying to show, the ode suggests that neither mode of understanding is sufficient by itself, and that both necessarily intermingle in any interpretive act. While neither the work of art nor its interpreter can escape history, one's interpretation of the work must, for this very reason, partake of the nature of an aesthetic fiction.

Before turning directly to the ode, however, I would like to examine some of the historical context that haunts about *its* shape. For as we shall see, the poem's dramatisation of the conflict between aesthetics and history is not solely a product of Keats's imaginative genius but also a reflection of the contradictions inherent both in the age's approach to ancient art and in Keats's own contemporary position as an artist.

The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' was a child of the vogue for Greek art ushered in by Winckelmann in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Popularised in England by Fuseli's translation of *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (1765), Winckelmann's idealised vision of Greek culture quickly became a commonplace of contemporary art criticism. While we cannot be sure that Keats actually read Winckelmann, it seems probable that he would have heard of the great German art critic from Haydon, since Haydon had been a student of Fuseli and owned a copy of the *Reflections*.<sup>8</sup> Whether directly or indirectly, Keats certainly seems to have been inspired by Winckelmann's apotheosis of antiquity, so much so that he in turn imparted the same enthusiasm to others. Joseph Severn, for instance, fondly recalled Keats's discourses about 'the Greek spirit, - the Religion of the Beautiful, the Religion of

Joy, as he used to call it': 'Keats ... made me in love with the real living Spirit of the past. He was the first to point out to me how essentially modern that Spirit is: "It's an immortal youth", he would say, "just as there is no *Now* or *Then* for the Holy Ghost".'<sup>9</sup>

Keats's personification of 'the real living Spirit of the past' as 'an immortal youth' and the timeless, idyllic scene of stanzas 2 and 3 of 'Grecian Urn' both recall Winckelmann's own enraptured description of the Apollo Belvedere: 'Of all the works that escaped the havock of time, the statue of *Apollo* in *Belvedere*, is the sublimest idea of art.... [A]n eternal spring, like that of *Elysium*, blends the grandeur of man with the charms of youth.... [H]ere sick decay, and human flaws swell not, blood palpitates not here.... [P]eace dwells in blest tranquillity, and the smiles that beam in his eye seem to invite the love-sick muses.'<sup>10</sup> Like the speaker of 'Grecian Urn', Winckelmann finds in Greek art a world of unchanging beauty, free from the defects of poor humanity. But in order to maintain this vision, he must exclude the world of historical process as something that is outside the work. Contemplating the Apollo Belvedere, Winckelmann sees the images not of a particular place in time but of eternity. There is 'no *Now* or *Then*', as Keats says. Time is only what the work escapes.

This kind of dehistoricising of the artwork exemplifies what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls 'aesthetic differentiation' - 'disregarding everything in which a work is rooted (its original context of life, and the religious or secular function which gave it its significance)' so that 'it becomes visible as the "pure work of art"'.<sup>11</sup> For Gadamer, this aesthetic attitude is what produced such cultural phenomena as 'the "universal library" in the sphere of literature, the museum, the theatre, the concert hall, etc.', which all juxtapose the accumulated artifacts of the past in a kind of artificial 'simultaneity' (*Truth and Method*, p. 78). One might prefer to reverse cause and effect in Gadamer's account, arguing instead that such institutions as the museum produced 'aesthetic differentiation'. As André Malraux suggests, 'Museums have imposed on the spectator a wholly new attitude towards the work of art. For they have tended to estrange the works they bring together from their original functions and to transform even portraiture into "pictures"'.<sup>12</sup> I mention this institutional perception because it too would have played a role in Keats's perception of antiquity. Unlike Winckelmann, who had the opportunity to visit the archaeological sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum, Keats knew



antique art only through books, such as the *Musée Napoléon*, and, most especially, through frequent visits to the British Museum.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, we might say that it was the museum that made possible Keats's treatment of the urn as an artistic symbol. By freeing the work from its original context, the museum transformed it into an objet d'art, to be contemplated in and of itself. Thus emptied of its original historical content, it could become the vehicle of the poet's own speculations about art.

Yet neither Keats nor his age uniformly viewed antique art from an historical perspective.<sup>14</sup> While Keats's urn has been cut off from the past, stanzas 1 and 4 of the ode nevertheless bear witness to an attempt to recover that past. Aesthetic consciousness was never fully disengaged from the consciousness of history. Indeed, the very claims made by Winckelmann for the superiority of Greek art involved historical arguments (see Gadamer, p. 176). In order to justify his assertions, Winckelmann offered an account of the world that produced that art, attributing the refinement of Greek taste not only to climate but also to cultural factors such as mythology, political systems, sports, and even clothing. Thus Winckelmann acknowledged the extent to which art is a social production, rooted in a localised historical matrix, and in doing so he implicitly raised the question of whether ancient artistic practice could be imitated by the moderns. This ideal taste, he notes, 'was not only original among the Greeks, but seemed also quite peculiar to their country: it seldom went abroad without loss'.<sup>15</sup> Paradoxically, Winckelmann's attempt to define an eternally valid aesthetic ideal was contradicted by the very historical claims that undergird his argument.

The renewed interest in Greek art that was Winckelmann's legacy to European collectors and artists, and which spurred on efforts to retrieve classical artworks and place them in museums, was thus already fissured by this conflict between historicism and aestheticism. ... A specific example of this tension between historicism and aestheticism in contemporary discussions of classical art – an example with which Keats would have been intimately familiar – can be found in the debate over the value and authenticity of the Elgin marbles. Championed by Haydon, Lord Elgin's collection was disparaged by the respected and influential antiquarian Richard Payne Knight. Payne Knight questioned the originality and significance of the marbles primarily on historical grounds. 'You have lost your labour', he initially told Lord Elgin; 'your marbles

are overrated; they are not Greek, they are Roman of the time of Hadrian.'<sup>16</sup> Although Payne Knight later conceded that the marbles were indeed classical Greek works, he still maintained that they were 'merely architectural sculptures' not intended for close scrutiny, and that they had probably been executed only by 'workmen scarcely ranked among artists', rather than by Phidias himself.<sup>17</sup>

While these strictures may have been partially motivated by petty jealousy, they were also founded on Payne Knight's belief that the unbridled enthusiasm of his contemporaries for antique art too often failed to take into account the original situation in which that art was produced. In his *Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, for instance, he ridiculed the imitations of Greek temples that had recently become such ubiquitous ornaments in English country gardens:

In the rich lawns and shrubberies of England ..., they lose all that power to please which they so eminently possess on the barren hills of Agrigentum and Segesta, or the naked plains of Paestum and Athens.... the scenery, in which they sprang; and in which the mind, therefore, contemplates them connected and associated with numberless interesting circumstances, both local and historical – both physical and moral, upon which it delights to dwell. In our parks and gardens, on the contrary, they stand wholly unconnected with all that surrounds them – mere unmeaning excrescences. ...<sup>18</sup>

Though a collector of antiquities himself, Payne Knight believed that the attempt to re-create the art of the past in the world of the present was bound to fail. While one might succeed in reproducing the art object itself, one could never bring back the cultural situation that had given purpose and meaning to the original work.

For Haydon, by contrast, imitation was the only true method of ascertaining the authenticity and greatness of the Elgin marbles. Mere historical conjecture carried little weight in a case of aesthetic judgement. ... Although Haydon was a historical painter, he thought of his art first and foremost as the imitation of nature. Rather than disputing Knight's claims on historical grounds, therefore, Haydon displaced the field of debate to the realm of artistic practice. For him, the value of the marbles was evident from their anatomical realism, which he had discovered through the process of copying the marbles themselves: 'Let him who doubts [this truth], study them, as I have done, for eight years daily, and he will doubt it no longer.'<sup>19</sup>



As we can see, then, the debate between Payne Knight and Haydon raised a number of issues already implicit in Winckelmann's appreciation of Greek art. How can one best understand and judge the art of the past, through an internal aesthetic analysis, or through historical contextualisation? Can one effectively imitate antique art in the modern world, or is such art inextricably bound up with its historical origin?

Keats's sonnet 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles', written shortly after his visit to the British Museum with Haydon in March 1817, shows the young poet wrestling with these questions, trying to mediate between a historical and an aesthetic approach. Initially, the sonnet confronts the creative issue. While Keats adopts Winckelmann's view of Greek art as ideal, that ideal is also posited as unattainable, crushing the poet with the recognition of his own inadequacy. Nevertheless the sonnet makes claims for a certain pathetic sublimity in this tension between the poet's personal and historical limitations and the grandeur of the mythological world suggested by the marbles. As a modern poet, Keats cannot relive the past, but as an interpreter he can at least imagine the past and derive pleasure from the awareness of his difference from it:

Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep  
That I have not the cloudy winds to keep  
Fresh for the opening of the morning's eye.<sup>20</sup>  
(ll. 6-8)

Indeed, Keats suggests that the power of the marbles derives not simply from their timeless beauty but from the conjunction of that beauty with history:

Such dim-conceived glories of the brain  
Bring round the heart an undescribable feud;  
So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,  
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude  
Wasting of old time - with a billowy main -  
A sun - a shadow of a magnitude.  
(ll. 9-14)

If on one hand the marbles represent the eternal idea of 'Grecian grandeur' - and here the sonnet uses the English word employed by Fuseli to translate Winckelmann's 'Größe' - on the other hand Keats seems to be equally affected by the fact that the marbles belong to a world that is chronologically and geographically

distant, that they bear the marks not only of their culture but of the intervening centuries. Here Keats seems to be trying to synthesise the alternative positions of Haydon and Payne Knight. To see the marbles, for Keats, is not just to see their beauty but to become aware of their history - both of the world that created them ('A sun') and of their history since (their transport by Elgin on the 'billowy main') - and finally of the fact of history itself, the 'Wasting of old time' that reduces greatness to 'a shadow of a magnitude'. 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles' thus terminates in a series of increasingly elliptical phrases that imitate the fragmented marbles themselves in their power of suggestion. ... Part of their fascination for Keats may have come from the possibility that, in addition to conjuring up thoughts of 'Grecian grandeur' and 'the rude wasting of old time', the marbles called to mind the situation of his own art. As Gadamer has suggested, there is a similarity between the isolation of the artwork as an aesthetic object in the museum and the alienation of the artist in modern society. While 'the work loses its place and the world to which it belongs insofar as it belongs to aesthetic consciousness', this estrangement 'is paralleled by the artist also losing his place in the world' (Gadamer, p. 78).

We can trace this parallel quite precisely in the case of Keats, since he explicitly countered his failure to find a large contemporary public by placing his hopes in poetic immortality. Just as antique art could supposedly be rescued from the ruins of history by putting it in the museum and considering it in purely aesthetic terms, so Keats sought to rescue himself from his own contemporaries by projecting himself into the canon of great writers, the literary equivalent of the museum. Referring to the attacks on *Endymion*, for instance, he responds with astonishing self-assurance: 'This is a mere matter of the moment - I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death.'<sup>21</sup> Instead of writing merely for the moment, Keats sees himself as writing for all time.

But given the acuteness of his own historical consciousness, the notion of writing for the future could not have been uniformly reassuring to Keats.<sup>22</sup> As can be seen from his comments in the famous letter to Reynolds comparing Milton and Wordsworth, Keats clearly believed that poetry is not strictly a product of individual genius. ... poetry, he recognised, is also conditioned by its historical moment. ... A confrontation with the art of the past, then, would have been important to Keats because it also represented a confrontation with the destiny that he had willed for himself. ...



In her penetrating study of Keats's odes, Helen Vendler divides 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' into three movements, which she characterises as mimetic, archetypal, and aesthetic moments in the speaker's contemplation of the urn. While I agree with this tripartite division of the poem, I would prefer to label these movements as historicist, aesthetic, and hermeneutic.<sup>23</sup> The structure of the ode is that of a dialectical argument, in which the conflicting claims of history and aesthetics are dramatised and finally sublated into a third attitude – the hermeneutic – that includes them both as necessary but partial moments in the understanding of the artwork. But while the hermeneutic moment in this sense can be seen as the conclusion of a dialectical movement, this does not imply, as we shall see, that the meaning of the urn or the poem can be reduced to an essential formula.<sup>24</sup>

I think we can characterise the speaker's encounter with the urn in the first stanza as an attempt to understand the urn in historical terms, to see it as the expression of a foreign culture. The speaker approaches the urn as an antiquarian, like Payne Knight. From the outset, the urn is located in the general medium of time, its foster-parent, and is apostrophised as an historian. Understanding the urn historically is not an easy task, however, because of the temporal distance that separates the poem's speaker from the world of the urn's making. ... Interpretation is further complicated by the fact that the urn does not offer a direct account of history; it represents not its own time but the ideal time of pastoral. The locales of Tempe and Arcady were indeed real places in ancient Greece, but much more importantly they were the settings of romance. Thus the speaker realises that what he is inquiring into is a matter of 'legend', not fact, and that the urn is a 'Sylvan historian'. To call this historian 'Sylvan', however, is not necessarily to relinquish the historical question so quickly as Brooks implies when he says that the urn's histories 'may be characterised as "tales" – not formal history at all' (*Well Wrought Urn*, p. 155). For the ability to tell such tales and believe in them was for Keats part of an ideological moment. Already in 'Sleep and Poetry', he had characterised the 'lovely tale of human life' in the realm 'Of Flora, and old Pan' as a stage to be outgrown in favour of more realistic narratives of 'the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts' (ll. 110, 102, 124–5). One of Keats's persistent themes is the belatedness of the modern poet, who, like Psyche, is born 'too late for antique vows, / Too, too late for the fond believing lyre, / When holy were the haunted forest

boughs' ('Ode to Psyche', ll. 36–8).<sup>25</sup> To say that the urn can 'thus express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme', then, is not only to make a statement about the relative advantages of the visual as opposed to the verbal arts but to fix a historical difference between the world that could make the urn and Keats's own, since Keats could not in conscience tell a 'flowery tale' sweetly, that is, without the ironies and dashes of realism that he adds to 'Isabella' and 'The Eve of St. Agnes'. The poem's first stanza thus situates the urn in the world of the past, and performs a kind of sympathetic ideological critique, similar to the critique of Milton in the letter to Reynolds cited above.

In spite of this historical distance, however, the urn can still exercise an erotic charm. The breathless questions that conclude the first stanza – 'What men or gods are these? What maidens loth? / What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? / What wild ecstasy?' – suggest a mounting sexual tension that matches the ecstasy represented on the urn. Thus the apparently antiquarian curiosity of the speaker is transformed into a passionate and self-involved examination. ...

How is it that an artifact from a historically remote era can still affect us? The question that faces Keats here is essentially that later posed by Marx: 'The difficulty lies not in understanding that the Greek arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model.'<sup>26</sup> Stanzas 2 and 3 of the ode suggest two answers to this problem. One answer can be found in the subject matter itself. While cultures change, Keats seems to be saying, there remain certain passions, such as love and desire, that are so basic to the human condition that their portrayal will always maintain an immediate hold upon our imagination. But these two stanzas also seem to enact a second, more sophisticated explanation for the continuing appeal of the aesthetic work. 'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter' focuses our attention on the play between the expressed and the unexpressed in the work of art, a form of play that necessarily involves the audience. As E. H. Gombrich reminds us, all art must involve a form of symbolisation of the represented, since the work of art cannot simply be what it represents. This process of symbolisation endows the work with a certain openness, which in turn requires various forms of concretisation by the audience. 'Any picture, by its very nature', Gombrich



notes, 'remains an appeal to the visual imagination; it must be supplemented in order to be understood.'<sup>27</sup> Keats's own example of this process extends beyond the realm of the merely visual, calling into play the auditory imagination, but the point is similar. The melodies of the piper on the urn are sweeter than those actually heard because they address not the 'sensual ear' but the 'spirit'; that is, they exist only in a potential form that allows the imagination a certain freedom in the process of actualising them.

In this sense, it becomes the task of the audience to perform the work of art. The urn, as [W. J.] Bate observes, 'remains ready to come alive ... as music on the printed page becomes alive when the inked notes are scanned and interpreted by some later imagination'.<sup>28</sup> Significantly, whereas the first stanza records a series of questions, suggesting that the urn presents an independent world to be interrogated by the speaker, the imperatives of the second stanza – 'play on', 'Pipe to the spirit', 'do not grieve' – now imply that it is the speaker who gives life to the scene before him, putting it in play through his directions.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, we might even venture to say that all of the statements in stanzas 2 and 3 seem to carry this imperative overtone, telling the figures on the urn what they can and will do. Thus the speaker can endow the urn's representations with a life of their own, speculating on the joys and frustrations of the fair youth, and attributing emotions even to the trees that shelter the lovers. Keats's point here, I take it, is that our interest in art often involves the pathetic fallacy, projecting our own feelings onto inanimate objects. As the speaker thus enacts in his imagination the drama portrayed on the urn, it seems to be lifted out of the past into the present; it seems to be happening 'now'. This feeling of contemporaneous performance dissolves the historical distance that separates the speaker from the urn and allows him to identify with it. Furthermore, this 'now' seems to be infinitely repeatable, as is suggested by the echoing repetitions in these two stanzas of 'not ever', 'never', and 'for ever', 'lover' and 'love', and 'happy'. Out of such repetition the speaker conjures an image of eternal bliss, a perpetually postponed climax that cannot cloy. Thus the urn makes it possible for the speaker to fantasise about a world without flux, not only because it is in the nature of visual art to deny temporality but because the performability of the aesthetic object allows him to repeat the same scenario over and over again. And in so far as the urn allows these fantasies, catering to recurrent human desire, it appears itself to have transcended time and annihilated history.

But Keats also implies that this kind of identification with the urn's representations and the resulting belief in the possibility of transcending history may depend upon a certain bad faith. In the end the speaker's echoing incantations begin to ring hollow; as every schoolchild knows, the same word repeated too many times begins to lose all meaning. Infinite repetition may only lead to numbness. Interleaved among the 'love', there is the undertone of 'leave', 'leaves', 'leaves', implying that departures are inevitable.<sup>30</sup> As Brooks points out (*Well Wrought Urn*, p. 159), to say that the love depicted on the urn is 'far above' 'All breathing human passion' is not only to indicate its ideal incorporeality but also to suggest that it is altogether outside the realm of what is recognisably human. And, by the same token, to say that the urn transcends history because it is art, and art represents the eternal essences of human being, is precisely to abstract art from any real human context.

As if to insist on these points, Keats turns in stanza 4 to a scene that cannot be conceived as universal – a sacrificial procession. Not only does this procession hint at a darker side of life concealed by the picture of young love given in stanzas 2 and 3, it also returns the urn to an alien, 'mysterious' world of ritual, reminding us again that the culture represented by the urn is foreign to us, and that the urn is a historical artifact. Whereas in the previous two stanzas the speaker's apostrophes insist on the urn's capacity to escape time, here the questions reassert a temporal modality, insisting on ends and beginnings – 'To what green altar?' and from 'What little town?'

But is the temporality now that of fiction or that of history? On one hand, these questions seek to extend the story that is implied by the scene of sacrificial procession. On the other hand, they are also archaeological questions, the kind that might be asked by someone trying to locate the historical and geographical origin of the urn. Here the poem seems to blur the line between fiction and history, insisting on the extent to which both rely on the elaboration of a narrative schema. The extension of that narrative inevitably requires the speaker to move beyond the boundaries of representation, imagining a town and an altar that are not actually pictured on the urn. Whether we consider the urn as historical artifact or as fictional representation, then, it needs someone to tell its story. By itself it is not self-complete and self-explanatory; it is the fragment of a world that can only be reconstructed



through the work of an interpreter. As many commentators have noted, the urn might be classed among what Keats called "Things wholly exist" (*Keats's Letters*, I, 243). While on one hand the kind of ahistorical self-projection into the urn's representations undertaken by the speaker in stanzas 2 and 3 can be seen as an act of bad faith, on the other hand it would be an illusion to believe that historical inquiry can somehow proceed without the aid of interpretive imagination.<sup>31</sup> As Keats observed in one of his letters, "the different states of human society must depend upon the Powers of his Mind – that is you can imagine a roman triumph, or an olympic game as well as I can" (*Keats's Letters*, II, 18). History is a real and binding force in human affairs, but historical understanding must also always be a form of storytelling, since, from our own standpoint in history, we can only know the past through a kind of imaginative projection.

The haunting power of the speaker's questions in stanza 4 results from this attempt to recover the distant past as a fictive presence. The world of the urn is imagined as if its drama were unfolding in an ahistorical 'now' – 'this pious morn'. Yet at the same time the stanza insists upon the gulf of silence that separates the speaker from that world, just as the speaker's return to the questioning attitude of the first stanza seems to acknowledge that this world can never be known except as a matter of conjecture. The town at the origin of the procession is created by the speaker's imagination, only to be abandoned as forever desolate, lost in history. Thus the fourth stanza evokes the dual sense of presence and absence, proximity and distance, that troubles all interpretation.

Stanza 5 begins by recapitulating these issues in a kind of coda. The urn is an 'Attic shape' – historically determined, yet still an aesthetic form, a wrought, marble artifact that nevertheless invites the speaker to re-experience its scenes as immediate and organically alive. As a 'silent form', the urn requires that its audience speak for it. And yet to interpret the urn honestly is also to confront the spectre of eternity, which reminds us that the enterprise of speaking for the urn is necessarily presumptuous, in that it assumes that one has overcome history and achieved a transcendental standpoint of non-contingent knowledge. Hence the urn is figured as a riddle without a solution, teasing 'us out of thought', compelling and repelling the interpreter's attempts at understanding.

The urn is, finally, a 'Cold Pastoral', for while it supposedly represents a timeless world, it also reminds us of our own temporality. Keats's epithet recalls the expression 'cold beauty' in his sonnet 'On Visiting the Tomb of Burns', which is applied to a landscape that, though beautiful in itself, cannot be enjoyed apart from the consciousness of natural ephemerality and human mortality. In that sonnet, Keats opposes this troubled consciousness to the Greek world, which could relish the 'real of beauty'. Burns's misfortune, according to Keats, was to be born into a northern world and a 'barbarous age' in which pleasure and beauty are divorced from life by 'the kirk' and the 'doctrine of thrift' (*Keats's Letters*, I, 319–20). Thus while 'Cold' has usually been interpreted as a reference to the urn's own marble hardness, its inhuman quality as artifact, it may also be taken as an expression of the speaker's historical distance from the urn. The urn's pastoral, warm and inviting as it may appear, must remain a kind of 'cold beauty' for him, since he cannot, in the world and time in which he lives, relish 'the real of beauty'.

Whereas the speaker previously sought to locate the urn in history, he has now become aware of his own historicity. Like the little town at the other end of the processional route, 'this generation' shall also be wasted by time, and the urn shall 'remain, in midst of other woe / Than ours'. The speaker's encounter with the urn can only be understood as a single episode in its history. Like the figures in the sacrificial procession, the urn is involved in a perpetual journey that never goes anywhere, apparently moving forward in time without ever coming to a point where its significance can be summed up.

The urn's concluding message, however – 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' – would seem to offer just such a summation, apparently asserting the universal and implicitly timeless meaning of the work of art. Yet if one takes seriously the tension between history and aesthetics that seems to pervade the rest of the poem, it is difficult to read this phrase simply as the unequivocal affirmation of the timeless truth of the aesthetic object. We could of course take such a simplistic declaration as an indication of either the limitations of the urn itself or the speaker's desperate will to meaning. There is however another possible interpretation, one less at odds with the rest of the poem, namely, that the line states a hermeneutic principle – that all truth in interpretation depends upon a process of imaginative projection by the interpreter. As Gadamer writes, 'A



person who is trying to understand a text is always performing an act of projecting. He projects before himself a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the latter emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. The working out of this fore-project, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there' (*Truth and Method*, p. 236). It is just this process of projection and revision that the ode dramatises. As the speaker gradually moves through his alternative approaches to the urn, he comes to a better understanding of how it speaks and what it has to say.

Indeed, I would argue that in the famous passage from the letters that is so often cited as a gloss to the urn's sentence – 'What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not' (*Keats's Letters*, I, 184) – Keats espouses a view of the relations between part and whole, meaning and projection, that is in some ways comparable to Gadamer's description of the hermeneutic circle.<sup>32</sup> Keats's concern in this passage, I think, is not with timeless Neoplatonic essences but with the *act* of imagination *seizing* truth. Imagination, Keats goes on to suggest, is a heuristic tool, supplementing logic, in any cognitive process. ...

The qualification that follows – 'that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know' – might be taken then as a recognition of the role that imagination must inevitably play in human knowledge, because of the very limitations of our mortal state. In this sense, it both echoes and answers the conclusion to Byron's own meditation on a Grecian urn in Canto 2 of *Childe Harold*: 'Well didst thou speak, Athena's wisest son! / "All that we know is, nothing can be known"' (ll. 55–6). Like Byron, Keats recognises humanity's essential ignorance, but he also suggests that imagination allows us to surmise about the past. When *Childe Harold's* narrator, contemplating a human skull, asks 'Can all Saint, Sage, or Sophist ever writ, / People this lonely tower, this tenement refit?' (ll. 53–4), the speaker of 'Grecian Urn' answers, 'No, and yes'.

Read in these terms, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' deserves its place as the urn's message to future generations – not because the urn itself has transcended history but because it is this process of interpretive projection and revision that each generation will enact in its effort to understand the urn. This reading would still be subject to potential ironisation by the quotation marks in the *Lamia* volume, however, since it is in the nature of such a view of truth to

destabilise itself, recognising all statements of truth, including its own statement, as provisional. Indeed, we might say that this very provisionality is encoded into the poem's conclusion, since we are not really sure who is speaking, the urn or the poem's speaker. Though the speaker attributes the message to the urn, it must be the speaker's own sentence, one would think, since the urn itself is silent.

In this case, the textual controversy over the punctuation of the poem's last two lines becomes all the more interesting, since it gives material substance to the question of who is speaking, the interpreter or the material interpreted, in any interpretive act. Despite our desire for a definitive text, it seems to me that we need to be open to the possibility that the variations in punctuation may reflect Keats's own indecision as to who should have the poem's final word.<sup>33</sup> Should the speaker be shown as merely transmitting to future readers the wisdom of an earlier age, or should that wisdom be displayed as the speaker's own, discovered through the encounter with the urn? The fact that the later version of the poem printed in the *Lamia* volume encloses 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' in quotation marks, apparently leaving the ode's last thirteen words to the speaker, suggests that in the end Keats may have chosen to try to make clearer the speaker's role as an interpreter and mediator of the urn's message. However we decide this controversy, it seems to me that its most interesting aspect is that as interpreters of the poem we find ourselves in exactly the same position as the poem's speaker. Just as the speaker attributes to the urn a message that he must himself produce, so we try to ascertain the 'truth' about the poem, without fully realising perhaps the extent to which that 'truth' will be a function of our own notions of 'beauty'. In this century, for instance, we have gone through a continual process of reinterpreting the ode's conclusion and its relationship to the rest of the poem because we have developed the notion that 'true' art avoids simplistic didacticism.

In effect, Keats's poem turns upon itself and on us, so that the question of how to understand the urn progressively becomes a reflection on the process of interpretation itself, thereby entangling both the poem's speaker and ourselves as its readers. Like the urn, the poem functions in two ways, both as a fictive representation that can be given a certain historical context and as an aesthetic structure that still invites our participation. Thus while we can locate the poem's dilemmas in terms of certain historical issues, as I



have tried to do in the first half of this essay, this does not close the poem, turning it into a set of historically determined and determinate assertions. The poem continues to intrigue and fascinate us. If the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' has become an enduring object of interpretation, this is because the ode, like the urn, like eternity, 'tease[s] us out of thought'. The persistence of art lies in its enigmas, in the way in which it holds open certain questions for further interpretation.<sup>34</sup> The effort to 'think' this poem, to assign it to a particular ideology and close off its questions, is called into question by the poem itself, not only in its dramatisation of the urns' continuing appeal to the aesthetic imagination but in terms of its rhetoric and fiction as well.

Rhetorically, the ode's repeated questions, overinsistent repetitions, riddling puns and oxymorons, and ambiguous syntax tease us with multiple possibilities, inducing in us the same kinds of doubts that plague the poem's speaker. ... The poem's questions, for instance, rather than determining contexts for the urn's representations, merely suggest possible conjectures without deciding between them: deities or mortals, or both; Tempe or Arcady; a little town by a river or the seashore or in the mountains. Or how do we understand a line like 'More happy love! more happy, happy love'? Is Keats being ironic at his speaker's expense, or is this a failure of poetic invention? How do we read the word 'still', as adverb or adjective, as 'not yet' or 'motionless', eternally prolonged, or merely dead? Is 'All breathing human passion far above' intended as praise or blame? And what of the urn's final oracular pronouncement, which has been the source of constant dispute? While I have attempted to interpret this phrase, it remains equally true that the urn's hermetic sentence, like the rest of its rhetoric, seems deliberately calculated to resist interpretation.

In terms of its fiction, the poem's story about interpreting the urn is one that mirrors our own activity, so that to look at the poem is also to look at ourselves looking at the poem. We cannot disentangle ourselves from Keats's fiction, since it already incorporates our own interpretive activity within it, anticipating our responses to the poem. Through its own self-consciousness about being interpreted, the ode forces us to be self-conscious about our positions as interpreters. It reminds us that just as the speaker's understanding of the urn depends upon his perspective, so our understanding of the poem will depend upon the way in which we choose to view it.

In 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', Keats weighs the hermeneutic claims of both aestheticism and historicism, pointing out their weaknesses while retaining their truths. Aestheticism abstracts too easily from the real human world of history, while historicism must acknowledge both the aesthetic potentiality of art and the extent to which historical interpretation itself depends upon a form of aesthetic activity. In dramatising these modes of reading, the poem also exposes the deficiencies in certain ways of reading the Romantics. To see in Keats's poem the affirmation of the transhistorical truth of the aesthetic object, or alternatively to say that one can historicise this affirmation as an unconscious form of ideology, seems to me to underestimate Keats's own awareness of the paradoxes of writing for the future. The ode attempts to suggest a third alternative, a mode of reading that does not take the story out of history, and vice versa, acknowledging the role of the interpreter as participant in the interpretive act. But in taking up this stance, the poem must also renounce any claim to be able to determine its own interpretation definitively, just as I must renounce any claim that this essay might close the history of its reading. In committing his work to the future, Keats realised, he was also committing it to the medium of history, to the perpetual reading and reinterpretation that maintains our dialogue with the past.

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#### NOTES

[A. W. Phinney's discussion of Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' mediates between the purely formalist readings of a New Critic like Cleanth Brooks (who produced a justly celebrated analysis of the verbal and structural effects of the poem in his book *The Well Wrought Urn* [New York, 1947]) and historicist critics, like Jerome McGann, who argue that the poem reflects the ideology of its time. As a way of evading the exclusivity of these two positions, Phinney turns to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer who, in his *Truth and Method* (1975), postulated the idea that a literary work does not appear in the world as a neatly packaged object of meaning. Meaning for Gadamer and his followers depends on the historical situation of the reader or interpreter. Gadamer claimed that all interpretations of past literature arise from a dialogue between the past and the present. At one level we seek to discover the questions which the work of art asks about its own time and yet, at another, the kinds of question we ask about a poem such as Keats's ode depend on those issues which are current for us. Thus our present perspective



always involves a relationship with the past, but at the same time the past can only be interpreted through the filter of the present. Gadamer argued for the method of 'Hermeneutics', which views understanding as a 'fusion' of past and present in which the truth of interpretation depends on a process of imaginative projection by the interpreter. For Phinney, Keats's ode anticipates the very conflicts which have resulted from the history of its interpretation, dramatising the conflicting aims of aesthetic criticism and historical critique. A number of brief cuts have been made to Phinney's article. Ed.]

1. Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York, 1947; reprint, 1975), pp. 156, 163, 162. Among Brooks's predecessors, H. W. Garrod (*Keats* [Oxford, 1926] and Kenneth Burke ('Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats', *Accent*, 4 [1943], 30-42) were most sensitive to the implied limitations of the figures on the urn, but neither dealt specifically with the theme of history in the poem.
2. See the discussion of this tension in Brooks's reading by Stuart Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton, NJ, 1973), pp. 275-6.
3. Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, 1984), p. 46.
4. Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry* (1937; reprint, New York, 1973), pp. 107-8.
5. Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago, 1983), p. 91. See also McGann's critique of the tradition of formalist readings of Keats in 'Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism' in *The Beauty of Inflections. Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford, 1985). The relations between Keats's poetry and the aesthetic ideas and their historical and political context have become a prevalent topic in recent criticism. See, for example, Thomas Reed, 'Keats and the Gregarious Advance of Intellect in *Hyperion*' (*ELH*, 55 [1988], 195-232); Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (Oxford, 1988); and *Studies in Romanticism*, 25 (1986) which includes essays by Susan J. Wolfson, Morris Dickstein, William Keach, David Bromwich, Paul Fry, and Alan Bewell [The New Criticism to which Phinney refers was an American school of criticism of which Brooks was a pioneer. It argued that a poem should be analysed in terms of its formal structure and verbal patterns, in isolation from its biographical and historical context. For McGann and the New Historicism in Romantic studies, see the Introduction. Ed.]
6. For example, David Perkins, *The Quest for Permanence: The Symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats* (Cambridge, MA, 1959); Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, MA, 1963); and Douglas Bush, *John Keats: His Life and Writings* (New York, 1966) all emphasise the poet's 'imperfect contentment with the eternal but unfulfilled happiness of the figures on the urn' (Bush, p. 141).
7. See, however, the essays by Philip Fisher ('A Museum with One Work Inside: Keats and the Finality of Art', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 33 [1984], 85-102) and by Douglas B. Wilson ('Reading the Urn: Death in Keats's *Arcadia*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 25 [1985], 823-44), both of which anticipate some of my own concerns here, emphasising the poem's historical self-consciousness and the parallel situations of the poem's speaker and its reader.
8. Ian Jack, *Keats and the Mirror of Art* (Oxford, 1967), p. 38. [Benjamin R. Haydon was an artist and friend of Keats. Ed.]
9. William Sharp, *The Life and Letters of Joseph Severn* (London, 1982), p. 29.
10. Johann Joachim Winckelmann, 'Description of the Apollo Belvedere', *Universal Museum* (1768), p. 56. I would like to thank Mr Frank K. Lorenz, Curator of Special Collections at Hamilton College, for providing me with this text.
11. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2nd edn, 1965), trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York, 1975), p. 76.
12. André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence* (1951), trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1953), p. 14.
13. See Jack, *Keats and the Mirror of Art* for an extensive account of Keats's knowledge of art and of possible models for the Grecian urn.
14. See R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946), for a general account of the development of historical consciousness during this period. Both René Wellek (*The Rise of English Literary History* [Chapel Hill, NC, 1941] and Walter Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* [1970; reprint New York, 1972]) detail the growth of a historical view of literature in the eighteenth century.
15. Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks: With Instructions for the Connoisseur, and an Essay on Grace in Works of Art* (1755), trans. Henry Fuseli (London, 1765), p. 2.
16. *Autobiography of Benjamin Robert Haydon* (Oxford, 1927), p. 276.
17. Quoted in William St Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles* (London, 1967), pp. 177-8.
18. Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, 4th edn (London, 1808), pp. 169-70, 181-2.
19. Benjamin R. Haydon, 'On the Judgment of Connoisseurs Being Preferred to that of Professional Men. - Elgin Marbles, &c', *Examiner*, 429 (17 March 1816), pp. 162-3.



20. All quotations from Keats's poems are from John Keats, *Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, MA, 1982).
21. John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Rollins (Cambridge, MA, 1958), I, 394.
22. See Ronald Sharp, *Keats, Skepticism, and the Religion of Beauty* (Athens, GA, 1979), pp. 114-58, and J. Philip Eggers, 'Memory in Mankind: Keats's Historical Imagination', *PMLA*, 86 (1971), 990-8.
23. Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), pp. 118-21. My own analysis remains strongly indebted to Vendler's work. See also the excellent discussion of 'Grecian Urn' in Paul Fry, *The Poet's Calling in the English Ode* (New Haven, CT, 1980), which notes the hermeneutic dimensions of the poem.
24. As Fry observes, Keats 'submits all bias to the sublations of dialectic' (p. 220). Fry goes on to emphasise that 'many aspects of the odes are not confined within the shaping of dialect' (p. 221). See also the open-ended discussions of the structures of Keats's odes in Perkins, *The Quest for Permanence* and in Jack Stillinger, 'Imagination and Reality in the Odes' (*The Hoodwinking of Madeline, and Other Essays on Keats's Poems* [Urbana, IL, 1971], pp. 99-119).
25. On Keats's sense of modernity and belatedness, see Bate, *John Keats*, pp. 321-38; and Harold Bloom, 'Keats and the Embarrassments of Poetic Tradition', *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in the Romantic Tradition* (Chicago, 1971), pp. 130-42, and *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven, CT, 1976), pp. 112-42.
26. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York, 1973), p. 111.
27. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton, NJ, 1969), pp. 242-3.
28. Bate, *John Keats*, p. 518. Vendler, discussing the fourth stanza, writes that 'the audience, prompted by the visible artifact, engages by its interrogation in the act of cooperative mutual creation with the artist' (*Odes*, p. 122). See also Sperry, *Keats the Poet*, who repeatedly emphasises the speaker's role in bringing the scenes on the urn to life.
29. See Wasserman's fine analysis of the poem's 'grammatical moods', Earl Wasserman, *The Finer Tone: Keats's Major Poems* (Baltimore, MD, 1953), pp. 30-1.
30. I owe this recognition to Fisher ('A Museum with One Work Inside') who points out the importance of the pun in 'leave' and 'leaves' (p. 92).

31. As Fry notes, 'the urn as historian is shown to fail because it offers the past without interpretation' (*The Poet's Calling*, p. 251).
32. I should note, however, that Gadamer takes considerable pains to distinguish his position from Romantic hermeneutics, which he conceives as being oriented primarily toward 'the reproduction of an original unduly narrow, in my opinion, there certainly remain significant differences between Gadamer and Keats.
33. See Jack Stillinger, 'Who Says What to Whom at the End of "Ode on a Grecian Urn"?' in *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems*, pp. 167-73, for an account of the various versions and alternative interpretations of these lines. I agree that two of the raises. As he observes, it makes no sense to see the objections Stillinger as being addressed to the urn, since 'ye' is ordinarily plural and the urn has been addressed as 'thou'. Nor does it seem reasonable to think that the speaker is addressing the figures on the urn, since they are not 'on earth'.
34. See Sperry, 'What the ode expresses is the difficulty and yet the necessity of remaining content with the way art speaks to us, with the kind of "half-knowledge" it offers' (*Keats the Poet*, p. 278).