John Keats' Ode *on Grecian Urn*: An Analysis

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The 'Ode on Grecian Urn' invites special consideration among Keats' ode for two reasons .First, it is his maturest.Secondly, alone among the odes it has been interpreted in quite different ways. It is true that Keats himself thought that poems should explain themselves without comment, but in this case he did not succeed in his aim. The poem calls for comment because its meaning and purpose have been variously interpreted and variously judged. For this Keats is not entirely responsible. Most of us know the Ode so well that we do not trouble to ask carefully what it means, and, if we do ask, we try to force its meaning to fit our own convictions. What was perfectly clear to Keats is not so clear to us because e do not share all his ideas , and in our conceit we assume that his most pondered conclusions about his life-work must somehow agree with our own.

The title of the Ode suggests that Keats had in mind a particular work of Greek art, which he first describes and then interprets. But no Greek urn has been discovered which

corresponds with that which Keats describes. We must look at his words and see what he had in mind. His description is quite clear. His urn is of marble , and we may infer that the scenes on it are carved in relief:

With brede

Of marble men and maidens overwrought.

These scenes are two and separate. The one, described in the first three stanzas, is of a ‘mad pursuit’ in which a youth pursues a maiden. The other scene is of a sacrificial procession, in which a priest leads a garlanded heifer to a ‘green altar’ and is followed by a company of pious worshippers. The two scenes may be complementary, but they are not united.Their spirit and their temper are different, and in them Keats anticipates Nietzsche’s famous analysis of the Greek genius into the Nietzsche’s famous analysis of the Greek genius into Dionysian and Apollonian elements, ecstatic excitement and luminous order.

We are fortunate of being able to identify some of the elements from which Keats constructed his imagery Urn.His friend, Charles Wentworth Dilke, told his grandson, Sir Charles grandson , that a tracing of a marble urn had been made by Keats. This survives in Rome in the house on the Pizza di Spagna where Keats died.It was made from a book, published in 1804 by F.and P.Piranesi called *Les Monuments antiques du Musee*

Napoleon, with engravings by Thomas Piroli.The engravings which Keats copied is of one side of a marble vase made by the sculptor Sosibios and still to be seen in the Louvre. In the frieze on this vase the central point is an altar which is approached from each side of four figures. The nearest to the altar on the left brings or drags a kid. Behind it are a woman playing the lyre and a man playing the flute. On the right side are an old man, a young man, and two female figures. In general, the scene brings some resemblance to that of the sacrifice in the ode.

The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is built on a neat and recognizable plain in three parts: introduction, main subject and conclusion. The introduction presents the Urn in its mystery and shows what question it poses to the poet. The main subject consists of scenes on the Urn, not as casual observer might notice them, as Keats sees them with the full force of his imaginative insight into the metaphysical problems which they raise and their hint of another life different from that which we ordinarily know. The conclusion relates the experience gained from the Urn to its special order of reality and answers the question which the poem has raised. The poem has what Aristotle would call a beginning, a middle and end, it asks questions and answers them. It evokes a special state of mind and relates this to ordinary life. It moves from eager curiosity to delighted amazement, exalted rapture and devout solemnity.

At each stage of the ‘Ode on Grecian Urn’ Keats transmutes into poetry thoughts to which he had given prolonged attention and which are very much is his own. The first verse sets out a situation, not indeed directly as in the ‘ Ode to a Nightingale’ but more mysteriously and more provokingly. The opening lines are a challenge to our situation:

Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness,

Thou foster-child of silence and slow-time.

In calling the Urn an ‘unravished bride of quietness’, Keats goes to the heart of the experience which concerns him. In a noisy, changing world here is something beyond sound and beyond change. The note of the poem is set at the start by these daring words. We are brought at once into an order of things remote from our usual lives. The poet asks that we should see the Urn in all the mystery of unchanging silence. Nor is this all. He chooses his words with careful precision. The Urn is an ‘unravish’d bride’ because it stands in a special, sacred relation to a special kind of existence and keeps this relation immaculate and intact. The Urn is a concrete symbol of some vast reality which can be reached only through a knowledge of individual objects which share and reflect its character.

The Urn is also the ‘foster –child of silence and slow time’ .It is not their actual child, because they have not created it.But they have kept and preserved it, and that is why it is called their

‘foster-child’. Keats felt strongly the appeal of the uncalendared past and saw in the Urn and saw in the Urn a repository of the wisdom of the ages. But he saw more than that.In this line he concentrates a thought which meant much to him and to which he had given fuller expression elsewhere. It concerns what he calls ‘ethereal things’

The first stanza of the Ode sets out the situation with which Keats begins. The Ode is an ‘ethereal thing’ which raises and invites question. At the start questions do not look very difficult, but, as Keats develops his theme, we see that they have a special point. He does not wish to who the figures on the Urn are, but what they are, and what they mean. In the next three stanzas he shows how much there in these questions and in what relation they stand to his themes of quietness and silence. Keats challenges our curiosity by a paradox expressed with a simplicity which makes it all the more striking:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard

Are sweeter, therefore,yet soft pipes,play on

Not to the sensual ear, but,more endear’d

Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.

The conception of this unheard music Keats expresses lies close to the center of all truly creative experience. Great as was his

physical sensibility and his appreciation of everything that came through his senses, he knew in the very moment of enjoying it that it was not everything and not enough. Anything so vivid and yet so transient must be related to some larger reality which ,being permanent and complete, gives a satisfying basis to it.We may legitimately call this reality an ideal world, if by that we mean an order of things which gives substance and significance to the gifts of senses.

The main subject of the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is the creative ecstasy which the artist perpetuates in a masterpiece. In the three middle stanzas, Keats shows the full meaning of the hints which he has thrown out at the beginning.He has up to a point answered the questions posed at the end of the first stanza.The 'leaf-fring' legend which haunts about the shape of the Urn is seen to be something very special and wonderful, and yet ultimately not unfamiliar. But Keats is not content to leave his leave his subject at that. He feels compelled to reach some conclusion, to make explicit what this experience means. Just as in the 'Ode to Nightingale' he closes by showing the relation of the bird's rapture to his own life ,so in the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' he tries to express the meaning of this timeless rapture to beings who live in time. Addressing the Urn , Keats says :

Thou ,silent form, dost tease us out of thought

As doth eternity.

This does not mean that the question of timeless raised by the Urn is a philosophical problem beyond Keats'reach.No doubt it was, and he would have been the first to admit it.But he is not thinking of that. He means that works of art like the Urn seduce us from the ordinary life of thought into the extraordinary life of imagination. We must relate the words of Ode to those in Keats' epistle to Reynolds in which he rejects philosophy:

Oh, never will the prize,

High reason, and the love of good and ill,

Be my award! Things cannot to the will

Be settled, but they tease us out of thought.

Here Keats expresses his unwillingness to leave his own special approach to experience through the imagination for something like philosophy, and his refusal is based on the belief that the mystery of things cannot be mastered by an act of will but forces us 'out of thought 'that is , from ordinary ways of thinking into the approach of imagination. By thought he means the discursive, puzzled, analytical activity of the intellect. The words in the Ode represent a similar view. The Urn belongs to an order of things which is beyond such thought. It is as remote as the eternity which in its timeless

existence it represents. Nor is it only outside thought. It is also outside the ordinary emotions, and that is why its story is a ‘cold pastoral’. Though in the picture of empty town there is a momentary hint of pathos at its desolation, this is only a hint and is intended to remind us that our ordinary existence is different from that of the Urn. The desolation is transcended in the absence of any human being to speak or to feel it :

and not a soul to tell

Why thou art desolate, can e’er return.

In the last resort, art reaches beyond the emotion to something impersonal and absolute

The belief that ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’ is true for the artist while he is concerned with his art. Unless he believes this, he is in danger of ruining his art. The Óde on a Grecian Urn’tells what great art means to those who create it, and, so long this doctorine is not applied beyond its proper confines, it is not only clear but true.

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