

ODE ON A GRECIAN URN: THE LONGEST DEBATE IN LITERATURE

One of the most debated poems of the 20th century wasn't written by a modernist, nor was it even penned in that century. John Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn* was written in May 1819, published a year later (Keats died in February 1821) alongside the other Great Odes—one of the most considerable series of poems in the entire English language, and certainly the cornerstone of Keats' reputation as a poet.

A very helpful article over at Wikipedia includes the following information about the mass of critical scrutiny, controversy and defense the Great Poem has caused:

1) [Poet laureate Robert Bridges](#) sparked the debate when he argued: "The thought as enounced in the first stanza is the supremacy of ideal art over Nature, because of its unchanging expression of perfect; and this is true and beautiful; but its amplification in the poem is unprogressive, monotonous, and scattered ... which gives an effect of poverty in spite of the beauty. The last stanza enters stumbling upon a pun, but its concluding lines are very fine, and make a sort of recovery with their forcible directness."

Bridges believed that the final lines redeemed an otherwise bad poem.

2) [Arthur Quiller-Couch](#) responded with a contrary view and claimed that the lines were "a vague observation — to anyone whom life has taught to face facts and define his terms, actually an *uneducated* conclusion, albeit most pardonable in one so young and ardent."^[47] The debate expanded when [I. A. Richards](#), an English literary critic who analysed Keats's poems in 1929, relied on the final lines of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" to discuss "pseudo-statements" in poetry:

"On the one hand there are very many people who, if they read any poetry at all, try to take all its statements seriously — and find them silly ... This may seem an absurd mistake but, alas! it is none the less common. On the other hand there are those who succeed too well, who swallow 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty ...,' as the quintessence of an aesthetic philosophy, not as the expression of a certain blend of feelings, and proceed into a complete stalemate of muddle-mindedness as a result of their linguistic naivete."

3) Poet and critic [T. S. Eliot](#), in his 1929 "Dante" essay, responded to Richards: "I am at first included to agree ... But on re-reading the whole Ode, this line strikes me as a serious blemish on a beautiful poem, and the reason must be either that I fail to understand it, or that it is a statement which is untrue. And I suppose that Keats meant something by it, however remote his truth and his beauty may have been from these words in ordinary use. And I am sure that he would have repudiated any explanation of the line which called it a pseudo-statement ... The statement of Keats seems to me meaningless: or perhaps the fact that it is grammatically meaningless conceals another meaning from me."

4) In 1930, [John Middleton Murry](#) gave a history of these responses "to show the astonishing variety of opinion which exists at this day concerning the culmination of a poem whose beauty has been acknowledged for many years. Whether such another cause, and such another example, of critical diversity exists, I cannot say; if it does, it is unknown to me. My own opinion concerning the value of those two lines *in the context of the poem itself* is not very different from Mr. Eliot's."^[50]

5) [Cleanth Brooks](#) defended the lines from critics in 1947 and argued:

We shall not feel that the generalization, unqualified and to be taken literally, is meant to march out of its context to compete with the scientific and philosophical generalizations which dominate our world. 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' has precisely the same status, and the same justification as Shakespeare's 'Ripeness is all.' It is a speech 'in character' and supported by a dramatic context. To conclude thus may seem to weight the principle of dramatic propriety with more than it can bear. This would not be fair to the complexity of the problem of truth in art nor fair to Keats's little parable. Granted; and yet the principle of dramatic propriety may take us further than would first appear. Respect for it may at least insure our dealing with the problem of truth at the level on which it is really relevant to literature.^[51]

6) [M. H. Abrams](#) responded to Brooks's view in 1957: "I entirely agree, then, with Professor Brooks in his explication of the *Ode*, that 'Beauty is truth' ... is to be considered as a speech 'in character' and 'dramatically appropriate' to the Urn. I am uneasy, however, about his final reference to 'the world-view ...' For the poem as a whole is equally an utterance by a dramatically presented speaker, and none of its statements is proffered for our endorsement as a philosophical generalization of unlimited scope. They are all, therefore, to be apprehended as histrionic elements which are 'in character' and 'dramatically appropriate,' for their inherent interest as stages in the evolution of an artistically ordered ... experience of a credible human being."

Wishing to update the debate, last week I sent the following email out to poets and critics to weigh in on the matter:

Arguably the most controversial poem of 20th century literary critical debate has been Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Since Robert Bridges, I.A. Richards and T.S. Eliot engaged the poem critically, poets and critics have taken all possible sides: defending its ending, dismissing it, even ignoring the rhetorical closing all together as an unimportant point. What I wanted to know, simply: What is your take on the ending of Keats' famous ode? Do you find it successful or unsuccessful?

Below are their responses of how this Whole Business of Truth and Beauty struck them. I encourage you, reader, to leave your own comment—and let the conversation continue. Next week, I hope to bring in some other quotes, from Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler, among others, share some other reactions from contemporary poets and critics, and attempt to formulate my own opinion on the matter.

For now, we seem to have enough riches before us to ponder.

POETS, CRITICS AND READERS RESPONSES

7) I've certainly heard—and many times—critical statements to the effect that a given work of art failed because it had presented a scene or object or person as too beautiful (perfect, shapely, harmonious), thereby violating our consensus about the actual nature of experience, which we should acknowledge as being flawed, unshapely and dissonant. And that a proper understanding of beauty should insist on the inclusion of aspects of reality not traditionally considered pleasing or attractive. In short, it's the aesthetic of "Beauty is Truth, Truth, Beauty." Given that, I wouldn't be inclined to dismiss the Urn's statement as silly, so absurd as to ruin a great poem. To me the puzzling thing is that, in the poem, such a statement should be attributed to the Grecian Urn. Puzzling because it doesn't strike me that what we are told about this marble vessel of great beauty (in the traditional sense) accounts for the statement it makes. So for me an important critical project around this poem should be to explain why an aesthetic stance at odds with the "character" of this object should be pronounced in its voice. The tone of the conclusion suggests that the poem's observer and speaker does not, himself, share the view expressed by the Urn. The speaker condescends, perhaps with a certain amused tolerance, to the statement being made. So perhaps an aesthetics of imperfection and dissonance isn't at all what the Urn is urging. Yes, perhaps that's it: we're meant to understand that the Urn is so far out of contact with reality it doesn't even guess that the world is ever less than perfect, shapely, and harmonious. It thinks the

Beautiful representation of reality is unfailingly True. An object made of marble, its only “task” is to continue to exist as it is and display the relief sculptures on its surface. A non-functional artwork exempted from the painful struggle of fleshly existence might indeed believe the world was lovely throughout, as lovely as the scenes represented on its surface. That’s all it knows; and all it needs to know. We, the human observers, will need to know more. We aren’t going to be allowed to remain in the unflawed cosmos of the Urn. Sad, but there is a consolation. We are not frozen in immobility. We can live and move and breathe, and even kiss our beloveds; though of course we know that to love inscribes us in the order of time, and therefore consigns us, eventually, to the order of mortality—the extinction of ourselves as perceiving, thinking subjects. The Urn will still be there, unchanged, immobile, beautiful, impervious to time and to love. I assume Keats wants us to admire the Urn, but he also shows us why we don’t want to be it.

Alfred Corn

8) To borrow a lovely phrase from Ian Stewart, who was writing on physics (in *WHY BEAUTY IS TRUTH: A HISTORY OF SYMMETRY*, Basic Books, 2007), “beauty does not automatically ensure truth, but it helps.”

Yet not all truth is beautiful; some is obviously quite ugly.

A poem should not hate itself for wanting to be beautiful.

Jessica Palmer suggests that disorder is the new beauty – but allows that it could be also dereliction.

As for Eliot, we may counterpose the spirit of Kenneth Koch: One beauty conceals another. One truth may conceal another, too.

I have no anxiety whatsoever about the poem’s closing lines or whether they have, or ought to have, any truth-value.

As for beauty, as many have said, it’s in the language of the beholder.

Don Share

9) Plainly a lot hinges on who speaks the last two lines, and whether one or two speakers. I feel most comfortable with the idea that Keats knew exactly what he was about when he created “beauty is truth, truth beauty” as something both true and beautiful, and yet circular and inadequate. (This reading suggests, though it does not absolutely depend on, the idea that the urn says just these five words, leaving “that is all . . . need to know” being addressed by the speaker to the urn. The absolute circularity of “beauty is truth, truth beauty” so aptly mirrors that of the urn, whose depicted story has neither a start nor an end, that I incline to this reading. However, the last line and a half also expresses and continues a strong sense of circularity, so I wouldn’t be dismayed if MS evidence showed incontrovertibly that the urn speaks both final lines). Either way, the inadequacy and yet loveliness of the idea that truth and beauty are one and the same – which creates a triteness that is presumably what Eliot disliked – seems to me to be what Keats is talking about all through the poem. The paradox is that the human mind is incapable of absorbing the idea of eternity, but also unable not to be “teased” by it: the urn is a friend to man through the comfort of its unchangingness, and yet the old age of this generation and woe of the next are not to be cured by its message, although assuaged.

Frances Whistler

10) Beauty is Truth

An epitaph in tone

One can see it inscribed on a deathmark

A funereal inscription

On a tombstone

On an urn filled with ashes

Ashes to ashes, and all that good stuff that never ends

Another circular instance

Keats was always dying

Keats never was not

Like Stein’s a rose is a rose

As a hope, as a denial

Would be that all were circular always

Like all poetry is

Or makes it up as if it were

Dara Wier

11) $A = B$, and in case we didn’t get the point, $B = A$? I prefer to give Keats more credit. I don’t read “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” as a transcendental, let alone philosophical or mathematical, equation. The statement is addressed to someone, namely those of us who admire the urn but don’t entirely understand it. To me it’s about negative capability. Nothing wrong with knowledge, but we don’t *need* to know everything, and if we’re not able to entertain half-knowledge, we’ll miss out. Beauty is a kind of truth, and can be appreciated as such, without understanding. The converse proposition is that truth, even when not visually or feelingly beautiful, still has the beauty of being true. This isn’t immediately obvious from the second half of the verse in question, maybe I’m reading too much in two words, but I would argue that Keats’s beholders of unheard melodies and his Lovers who cannot kiss enjoy the beauty of those melodies and that love not because of Platonic ideals but because the melodies and love exist, they’re true. Ergo, truth is a kind of beauty.

Richard Zenith

READER RESPONSES

Christopher Barker February 13, 2010, 1:16 pm

12) This is a cold piece of marble, beautiful, yet without the hope of life – only a wonderful imitation and a sense of eternity. Eternity becomes hell with the thought of circles of continuity – unchanging. Truth is beauty, beauty truth. The reality of life, death, and the change of the seasons, not some eternal spring – what sacrifice. The characters on the urn have sacrificed life for beauty, but beauty is truth, not facade. “A terrible beauty is born” out of the ashes of reality.

[Joseph Hutchison](#) February 14, 2010, 6:53 pm

13) I hold with Alfred Corn on this. The urn speaks to the speaker of the poem, and what it says is both innocent and seductive: the urn is “an unravished bride,” after all. But Keats was a surgeon’s apprentice and surely knew better, though he probably wished the world otherwise.

Joe Weil February 14, 2010, 9:12 pm

14) OK, we begin with apostrophic address: Keats is addressing an urn. It can’t talk back. We accept this conceit: poets have the god given right to address urns, microwaves, other dead poets, various eating utensils. At one time, way back in the day, poets (druids, priests, and, to a certain extent poet kings) would stand on the prows of a ship and conjure, invoke the land they were about to claim. They would take power and lordship over it. It was

considered unpractical and fool hardy not to do so. This is the poet standing in for God's "let there be." Apostrophic address is, in a sense, a remnant of that poetic/spiritual function. If we consider the Heisenberg principle—the observation of any phenomena affects the way it behaves—then a little conjuring is not so far out of order. Of course, if we see a man talking to a building in the middle of a street, we assume he's a nut job, and pick up our pace, but we know speaking nicely to plants has a good effect upon them. It's when the plants start talking back we must worry. My point is: Keats is, in a sense, conjuring this space he is about to enter. He is claiming it and, in a sense, the poem is a verbal alchemy: a conjuring and mixing of disparate forces (eternity and the transient) for the expressed purpose of creating a new compound—not eternity, not transience, but a compound of these elements which, in the verbal construct, can only be got at by words that are infected by the qualities of both realms. Everything is on the verge of happening, and nothing ever will happen: a sort of highly kinetic stillness, a feverish coldness, a deconstruction of binaries, a destabilizing of both the heavenly and earthly realms so that both are inspirited with the trace molecules of the other and neither is in its "pure" state, yet the Platonic ideal is embodied: unheard melodies are sweetest. Pure music is silence. It cannot be reduced to a series of notes. It is the "idea" and "ideal" of music, but I submit Keats was not satisfied with this Platonic construct. There's a sense of frustration with the pure, at the same time there is a longing to surrender to it, and a strain in that longing that grants a tension neither the consolation of beauty nor truth can relieve. They must therefore be combined to form this new compound. Beauty is truth; truth beauty...

Words like beauty, truth, good, evil, are terms whose power resides in their instability. God cannot be held to the law because then God would be subject to terms of the law. The "law" would be above God. Certain terms share in this divinity in so far as they cannot be reduced without losing their power. If we look for a neutral term for beauty and pick symmetry, we rule out the considerable forms of pleasure and attraction human beings find in the asymmetrical. If we reduce beauty to a dislogistic term such as "preciousness" we run the risk of seeing mere beauty as vapid and shallow. Certainly, symmetry, and preciousness can be elements of beauty, just as assymetry and gravitas can be elements of the beautiful. The ugly—that binary of the beautiful can have both symmetry or assymetry, preciousness or gravitas, but what makes the ugly? A sense of it being out of place, out of sorts, "wrongly" made, ill-figured. Still, this incongruity, this unseemliness can have the effect of either horror or humor: to see a swan glide majestically across a lake, and then see it rise to the land, and hear it suddenly let forth with a fart, is a form of schtick: People may either laugh or be horrified, most especially if they have a set idea or ideal swans. If they don't then they may not even find the graceful glide and the ungraceful fart at all incongruous. Neither beauty nor ugliness can be held to a single principle.

While such "god terms" are nebulous, they are also generative, and we pronounce them in the presence of the object or person on whom they are temporarily bestowed. At such times we are "teased" out of thought. No one on encountering something "beautiful" or "true" sits back and begins expounding on why and wherefore. To do so is mere boorishness and pedantry. First, we are stunned (teased) out of thought. We are left stupified, amazed—all the original connotations for the word stupid. We are made stupid with awe. Comic strips illustrated the word "boing!" Greeks called it "Eureka!" Hippies said "Wow." People in my old neighborhood might say: Shiiiiit (their way of inferring the thing has hit the spot, found the essential there). In this stupidity, the arrest of the intelligence, the suspension of judgment, truth/beauty resides. It is not a thing of intelligence. This is not the truth of intelligence, but of experiential awe, and, in that truth, beauty may exist, and in that beauty, truth appears in the sense that this thing "is," is beyond all categories and reductions.

Of course, the philosopher Averroes placed beauty in the category of the grotesque because it was not the norm. Normative aesthetic appeal is adequate to symmetry, prettiness, attractiveness. Keats is not satisfied with these. He is going towards something else, in which beauty and truth are the only couple who get to truly mate—to be one. Both the realms of the eternal and the transient can be essentialized in the mating and melding of truth with beauty. Before such a coupling, the laws of eternity and transience are re-composed into "slow time"—this hybrid, this odd creature who leaves us stupid with awe. In a moment of awe, of worship, all bets as to feeling or thought are off. One is given over to sensation/intuition—to that which suspends both judgment and analysis. At such a moment, all we need to know, and all we can know, is this compound wrought of the unity of beauty with truth. It would have been nice of Keats if he had told us what this compound was. He was quoting Reynolds. He was also limited by the need to sum up the Ode. We could attempt to make his ending more provisional, but I think that would be as ill-advised as correcting someone's cry at the point of orgasm, or telling them when they cried out after being stabbed: could you please expound on that. What does "ouch" mean? To analyze a moment of sublime transport, of ecstatic voicing is to run the risk of ruining the effect, and missing the point entirely. Come on. The guy was talking to an urn!

[Micah Towery](#) February 15, 2010, 3:41 am

15) I've been stewing on this poem for a few days now. (By the way, Richard Howard's reading was fantastic.) For me, the "tension" of this poem is that Keats say the thing which does not sing, does not speak, is the superior art. Yet he says this by poetry, by singing, in a sense. This might lend itself to an interpretation similar to Corn's. If Keats really believed this, why is he even writing the poem? Shouldn't he be learning how to make urns? I suppose that would make sense if you believe that this urn is a stand-in for all urns, or all like art. Or perhaps it isn't. Perhaps it is just THIS (well-wrought) urn. The question then would be, what is so well-wrought about this particular urn? I'm drawn to the pictures that Keats tells us about. Yet he does not describe them directly. We learn about them indirectly, through his questions. Who is this person? Is it a god or man? What songs are they singing? What is the cause of celebration? Like many good pieces of art, this urn doesn't answer all our questions, yet is framed in the eternal return of the things that are continual themes of art. Still, perhaps, but not without motion. Keats questions animate this urn. As he turns it (in his "living hands"?), it is like a film that gets replayed over and over.

If this urn stands in for anything, it may be those giant themes of art to which we always return. They are eternal (from the beginning), and they return. Yet they are not cold, faceless, without particularity. Keats wants to know who these people are, know the great festivals that inspired it. He recognizes, in the end, the urn cannot tell him the names. But this is not a tragedy because he recognizes these events, even if he does not know their names.

So what is the ultimate power of the urn? It remains. Though it may not speak the names of its "inhabitants," they remain through it. This urn is a representative of a place where the particular and transcendent meet. It is Godlike (transcendent) in its beauty and staying-power, but it is also a particular construction, of a particular story.

I am fine with the urn's statement (and honestly, I think it is Keats speaking through the urn—it seems to lyrically inclined to be otherwise, and lyric is always one-sided at the end of the day); however, I think it calls us to be much more judicious about what we call "beautiful." Something that appears beautiful can be rotten to its core. Something that appears true may seem contemptible. Like Joe said, these terms are vast. I don't know if I'd say they're unstable, but I do agree that they are Godlike in their ability to say "I am that I am." And this is something Keat's acknowledges. There is a tragedy in the empty street. The urn (the limits of the art?) cuts the story off before it is finished; there are not witnesses to speak.

My question, though, is what does Keats find comforting about this statement? I suppose it is the comfort of knowing that in the end we will not know much beyond this urn. It is a comfort to know that one's shortcomings are acceptable, despite our urge to be eternal, to last.

Harold Bloom writes in : *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*

The still urn is a bride of quietness, but the marriage is unconsummated; the urn speaks. By speaking it reveals itself as only a 'foster-child of silence and slow time'; its true parents are its creator and marble, but its creator communicates through silence, and the unchanging marble has arrested time, and slowed it toward the eternity of art.

The urn as sylvan historian expresses a tale more sweetly than our rhyme because it presents a tale in space and without the duration of time. Liberated from the sourness of temporal presentation, the tale lacks the either/or referential clarity of language: What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape/Of deities or mortals, or of both...

The scene cannot quite be identified, except in its deliberately typical elements. Reluctant maidens flee the mad pursuit of men or gods, but the struggle and reluctance are only part of the myth of pursuit, a ritual of delayed rape spurred on to wild ecstasy by pipes and timbrels. The sexual power of the depicted scene is one with the aesthetic; it depends ON potential, ON something ever more ABOUT TO BE, and suggests the sense of possible sublimity that art can communicate. In the second stanza, Keats intensifies the expectation: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/Are sweeter..."

The taking famishes the receiver; it is the greatest of Romantic paradoxes. The darkness of this situation is presented in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, but here Keats explores the twilight. ... As he gazes at the urn's musicians, Keats asks them to play on tonelessly, piping only to the spirit. A train of association carries from the soundless song through the eternal trees that will never know winter to the sexual stasis of the kiss that cannot take place. The happy melodist, unwearies, forever pipes songs that are forever new. The urn's youth is forever panting, but also forever young. All these, the urn's foliage, song and singer, beloved and lover, are "All human passion far above/ That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd." ... For Keats, and Wordsworth before him, to call something 'human' is to eulogize it. Keats does not deprecate the human in this line or anywhere else, and we miss the line's meaning if we do not read it as including its own contrary. Everything is far above the urn and thus mortal, subject to being sorrowful and will lost their beauty [and become ashes in the urn]. The more 'happy, happy love' depicted on the urn is as far below human passion as it is far above. A mouth that has no moisture and no breath may be able to summon breathless mouths, but it can as easily be called death-in-life as life-in-death. Confronted by an impassable paradox, Keats resolves his poem by a dialectic dependent on the simultaneous existence and non-existence of what is presented in art.

In a perfect Shakespearean stanza, he shifts perspectives and looks at another picture on the urn: "Who are these coming to the sacrifice...." What Keats sees is a procession; the rest is conjecture. ... The nature of poetic time, Keats finds, is such that it teases us out of thought, just as eternity defies our conceptualization. On this other side of the urn, the priest, heifer, townsfolk and little town are stopped forever; they neither reach their destination on the green hill nor go back to their little town, neither will they age and die. This is different from the process of life in the real poet's world.

Keats expresses the tension between artifice and truth in his final lines. The enduring beauty of a painted scene offers a vision of eternal truth, while at the same time the perpetually static nature of the image, which is acknowledged to be untruthful. The opposites of pursuit, escape, heard, unheard, sensual and spirit, immortality and mortality, art and breath are abstractions like beauty and truth. What is important is the near balance of pluses and minuses accorded to both sides of the pairs. Oppositions of time and timelessness, beauty and truth, get approval and disapproval almost equally. Putting the contrary notions together, we understand that death is somehow beautiful.

To be a friend to man, the urn has known an eternity of ecstasy and surfeit- of both love and death. As it makes its final claim to permanence, it is no longer just the happy urn of the first three stanzas. For Keats, "essential Beauty" had to be remote from pain and sorrow or from any other sort of tragic emotion. All that makes Keat's "tragic sublime" is the intensity that firms images of pain into truth and beauty. To know the truth of the imagination is to live again, and living, the soul will know the beauty of its own truth. The defiant naturalist in Keats takes him a liberating step beyond Coleridge; the soul that knows the identity of beauty and truth knows also its freedom,, which is all it needs to know.

The poem itself is actually on the side of the ideal and the skeptic at once, because the urn — like the ideal that it represents- is both admired and gently pitied throughout the speaker's musings. Readers do not keep returning to the ode to learn that life in the real world is preferable to life on an urn (or vice versa). Rather, they are repeatedly drawn to the spectacle of the speaker's full feeling for uncertainties, mysteries, doubts in the face of these oppositions. At any point, a resolution could go either way, and they read and re-read, I think, to see how the conflict will conclude each time.