

TOWARD RESOLVING KEATS' GRECIAN URN ODE

The conclusion of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" remains a much-disputed literary crux, one that invites a discussion of critical methodology. The hundreds of explicators the poem has attracted – many of them concentrating on the last lines – continue to search out exactly what the urn is counseling, what the tone of its counsel is and how that counsel figures into the ode it concludes. Analyses of the final stanza fall into half a dozen seemingly irreconcilable schools or types. How do we judge among these contending interpretations? What makes one more valid than another? These are issues that pertain not only to the Grecian Urn ode, but to the processes and judgments of criticism as well.

E. D. Hirsch offers an effective way of approaching such dilemmas. In *Validity of Interpretation*, he suggests, reasonably enough, when "interpretive disagreements . . . occur, genuine knowledge is possible only if someone takes the responsibility of adjudicating the issue in the light of all that is known."¹ This involves determining a general standard of critical sanity or sensibleness, identifying the various interpretations (in this case, of Keats' lines), examining the evidence relating to each (including biographical and historical), and then judging which interpretation is most probably valid.

In order to compare and judge contending interpretations, we need a standard on which to base our judgments. If we propose "what the text says," we have a standard, but a rather loose one. Any sequence of words, such as "Beauty is truth," can be interpreted in a number of different ways, all equally plausible. In an attempt to set up a more reliable standard of interpretation, one based on the actual linguistic situation of shared meanings, Hirsch proposes the standard of "coherence" – the relationship of meaning to the author's psychological and philosophical stance, to what the author is likely to mean under a particular set of circumstances. Hirsch's second major criterion is "correspondence" – an accounting for all the parts of the work and their relationship to the whole. In weighing contending interpretations, the critic should first examine the evidence in relation to coherence and correspondence. He should then conclude that one of the interpretations is probably valid or that not enough evidence exists to resolve the issue.

Although there are numerous interpretations of the concluding lines of Keats's Ode, each of them expresses one of six contending perspectives: that beauty and truth are the same (1) in life, (2) in Keats's dream world, (3) in some Platonic or Absolute reality, (4) in the world of the Urn, (5) in imaginative or artistic perception, and (6) in eternity.²

Critics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who maintained that beauty refers to truth in life judged such a belief as false or "immature." But recently, advocates of this interpretation argue that this belief represents the mature Keats, who directly confronts life, rejecting the

substitution of a dream world for the real world. Keats, they point out, states that "a World of Pains and troubles" is necessary "to school an Intelligence and make it a soul."³ Although in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" he represents a happy make-believe world of love and music, it is a frozen and static world. Like Wallace Stevens, Keats implies that process, involving decay and death, is necessary to beauty; the only beauty of genuine and lasting satisfaction is a truth that includes the fact of mutability.

The opposite of this view is the belief that the lines refer to Keats's dream world. E. C. Pettet describes this attitude:

out of his own actual unhappiness he is indulging in a dream of supreme felicity, and the constituents of this are such as no true mystic would for a moment accept: sexual passion, undecaying physical beauty, and an eternity of songs and poesy . . . The arrested moment is a necessary condition of his vision because happiness, as here conceived, is a fresh throbbing state of expectancy, and unhappiness the exhaustion and disillusionment of consummation.⁴

The euphoric scenes are imagined; the unheard melodies are sweeter than heard melodies; and imagined love is superior to actual love ("For ever panting, and for ever young; / All breathing human passion far above"). Keats frequently expresses the idea that imagination is superior to reality: "Ever let the fancy roam, / Pleasure never is at home." The Ode, then, expresses his belief that an imagined world of "beauty and sensuous life" is far above "the poor harsh real world of everyday life."⁵

Similar to the idea that the Ode portrays a dream world is the idea that it is Platonic; the world set apart from the real world is representative of absolute reality: "Beauty is eternal; in its concrete reality it is a symbol, a 'shadow' of the absolute; its tangible, visible being is merely a mode of revealing divine, ideal, immutable truth."⁶ In the world of the Absolute, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." That is all that Man knows or needs to know on earth.

A view that concentrates on "all ye need to know" is the interpretation that beauty and truth are the same (only) in the world of the Urn. The ideal world portrayed by the Urn is contrasted to the real world of pain. When the Urn, from its limited perspective, states that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," the poet responds that that is all the Urn or the figures on the Urn know or need to know. Man, in the world of struggle, needs to know many things, but the Urn or the figures need to know only that beauty and truth are the same.

The interpretation that has gained the widest acceptance is that the Ode implies that "imaginative insight . . . embodies the basic and fundamental perception of man and nature." Accordingly, the Ode is a "parable of the nature of poetry, and of art in general," the scenes on the Urn reflecting "an imaginative perception of essentials."⁷ As a pastoral "historian," the Urn expresses truth, exemplifying the esthetic principle that beauty and truth are one in art. This is the only knowledge that Man is likely to get on earth, and it is the only knowledge that he *has* to have. (Some interpreters

who hold this view maintain that this message, stated from the Urn's limited perspective, is to Keats false. The Urn says that in its world of art, beauty and truth are one. From the Urn's perspective, that is all that Man knows on earth and all he needs to know.)

The sixth and last interpretation of the Ode is that the Urn is a symbol of eternity, where beauty and truth are one. The major external support of this interpretation is Keats's "Adam's dream" letter to Benjamin Bailey—in which Keats states his belief that the imaginative perception of beauty is a reflection of eternity and that earthly happiness is repeated in eternity in a "finer tone." In four other letters, Keats states his belief or his desire to believe in eternity, particularly an eternity of sexual love. Much of Keats's poetry, including his longest poem, *Endymion*, also deals with eternity or eternal love. In "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the Urn doubly portends eternity because as a product of the imagination it reflects eternity and as a narrator ("historian") it depicts scenes of eternity. The Urn is a friend to Man, consoling him with its message that beauty in eternity is truth; that is all that Man knows or needs to know of eternity.

All these interpretations have some merit, but each faces problems that make validity difficult to establish. Critics who defend the idea that beauty refers to life put the emphasis on "truth," interpreting the concluding lines to mean that truth—the accurate representation of reality—is beauty, or the beautiful; truth, or a true rendering of the world, is necessary for genuine beauty. This interpretation is based on a valid assumption—that Keats is not an escapist living in a pleasant dream world. But it fails to demonstrate that Keats also believes that representing natural process is essential to artistic beauty. On the contrary, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" presents imagined melodies as superior to actual ones. Keats ends the Ode, according to the "life" interpretation, by denigrating the world of the Urn, of the false artificial pastoral. "O Attic shape," for example, is not then an apostrophe praising the Urn but a sign of Keats's disenchantment. Even if it could be established that Keats believes that natural process is necessary to beauty, there is no evidence that he believes that Man knows and needs to know *only* that truth is beauty.

The second interpretation, that the Ode portrays a dream world, is convincing up to its treatment of the concluding lines. E. C. Pettet, in his analysis, points out aspects of the poem that have generally been ignored—that Keats's ideal is not consummation but anticipation: "happiness . . . is a fresh, throbbing state of expectancy." But the "dream-world" interpretation fails to give a satisfactory explanation of the concluding lines. As numerous commentators have noted, Keats fully commits himself to life, extolling both philosophical knowledge and ethical action (*Letters*, II, 139, 146). He would have rejected the idea that a dream world is all that Man knows or needs to know.

The Platonic interpretation provides a more logical explanation of the Ode's concluding lines: beauty is truth, and truth is beauty in the ideal

world of the Absolute. According to this interpretation, what seems to be a paradox, the oneness of beauty and truth, is not a paradox. The problem, however, is that there is no evidence that Keats, although familiar with Platonism, was himself a Platonist. In fact, the sensuous and sexual life he portrays in the Ode is not suggestive of Platonism. And even if it could be demonstrated that Keats was a Platonist, it is not likely that he would have believed that Platonic truth is all that Man knows or needs to know.

In some ways, the most satisfactory explanation of the concluding lines is provided by the interpretation that beauty and truth are the same in the world of the Urn. There is then no contradiction in "all / Ye know . . . and all ye need to know"; the figures in the ideal world of the Urn know only beauty and need to know nothing else. This interpretation, however, faces major difficulties. First, it cannot account for the phrase "on earth," which is not likely to refer to the figures on the Urn. Throughout the poem, Keats stresses that the figures inhabit a world that is entirely different from the world of woe. Second, "that is all / Ye know on earth and all ye need to know" appears in this interpretation to be a postscript. The Urn, a friend to Man, proclaims, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," and then the poet adds, like an afterthought, that that is all the figures know or the Urn knows or needs to know. The Urn's statement, logically a part of its role of providing consolation, would not be a consolation, but a reminder to Man that he himself lives in a world of woe. Finally, such a statement to the Urn or the figures is inappropriate. The last stanza is totally devoted to enthusiastic praise addressed to the Urn. If the poet at the end addresses the figures, then he makes an abrupt shift from the Urn to the figures. If he addresses the Urn, he makes an abrupt shift in tone. In either case, he turns from praise to evaluation, delivering a lecture on what is obvious: the Urn or the figures need to know only that beauty is truth.

The fifth interpretation, that beauty refers to imaginative or artistic perception, is based on the valid idea that Keats places great value on the power of imagination. As he states in the Bailey letter, he has more confidence in imagination than in consecutive reason. Although he never fully makes up his mind on the place of art in society, he is convinced of its great value. Whatever his occasional doubts, he knew that poetry was the center of his life, and he hoped that it would do some good in the world. Could not poetry be a moral force in the sense of giving Man insight and raising his spirits? In the Ode, he takes the position, as Cleanth Brooks argues, that the Urn in some sense gives Man insight. Could Keats, then, be saying that beauty is truth in art and that that is all Man knows or needs to know? Although Keats may have believed that in art truth to human emotions is beauty or value (his position on this issue has not been precisely determined), he did not believe that this knowledge is all that Man needs. Only an uncompromising esthete would assert that art is Man's only intellectual necessity, and few interpreters would maintain that this was Keats' stance.

The view that beauty refers to art but that the Urn utters what Keats believes is a false philosophy detracts from the Urn as a consolation to Man. If the Urn's message is false, then the Urn is a false guide. If the view that the Urn erroneously says that beauty is truth depended solely on the characterization of the Urn, it might have validity. But we cannot ignore the role of the poet, who feels that the Urn and the message it implies is a consolation to Man. What the Urn says is in some sense true to Keats, whatever it may be to anyone else.

The final interpretation, that beauty refers to eternity, is based on the proposition that imagination reflects eternity and that eternity is the repetition in a "finer tone" of earthly happiness. The Urn, as a product of imagination (explained in the Bailey letter), and the scene of love and happiness symbolize and portend eternity. Keats compares the Urn to eternity, which he perceives as not subject to reason, only intuition. As he contemplates the Urn, feeling that he is "mounted on the Wings of Imagination," he becomes convinced, at least for the moment, that beauty is the truth of eternity.

This interpretation views not only the Urn but also the two scenes as symbols of eternity. Only one scene, however, is portrayed as eternal happiness, the scene of love and music. The other scene of eternity is one of desolation. Throughout the Ode, Keats views the figures in two different ways: as representative of idealized life (lines 5-10, Stanza I, and lines 1-7, Stanza IV) and as symbols of eternity (lines 5-10, Stanza II, lines 1-7, Stanza III, and lines 8-10, Stanza IV). In the last part of Stanza I and the first part of Stanza IV, Keats does not know precisely what life is being represented, except that it is Grecian. He looks at the "leaf-fring'd legend" as he would look at a painting. What life is being portrayed? He does not answer this question, except to say that the first scene is "wild ecstasy" and the second, "pious" worship. In Stanza II and the last three lines of Stanza IV, he transforms the figures into symbols of eternal life, of ecstasy and of desolation. In this attitude toward the Urn itself, however, Keats is consistent. Keats does not think of the Urn as being itself permanent but as symbolizing permanence – that is, eternity. Thus, even though Stanza IV portrays an eternity of desolation, the Ode, with its scene of ecstatic love, emphasizes eternal happiness. This interpretation, like the others, faces the problem of the meaning of "all," for Keats could not have believed that knowledge of eternity is all the knowledge Man has or needs.

Each of the interpretations assumes that beauty refers to life or Keats's dream world or Platonic reality or the world of the Urn or the imaginative perception or eternity. Those who maintain that the poet speaks the last line and a half to the Urn could argue that Keats does not believe that any of these propositions is all that Man needs to know. This argument cannot be refuted unless we can show that there is an implied phrase after "on earth":

When old age shall this generation waste,
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
 "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

If the poet speaks the last part of the concluding lines to the Urn or the figures, the problem of the meaning of "all" is solved, but we are left with the contradictory phrase "on earth" (not to mention the other objections to this interpretation). If Keats, however, is referring to eternity, the Urn could be saying that in its world, which is an emblem of the world of eternity, beauty is truth. The line could then read, "that is all / Ye know *on earth*" of eternity. What else could be Keats's purpose in using "on earth" except to imply a life opposite to life on earth? That beauty is truth is all Man knows on earth of eternal life, but apparently he would learn more when he experienced it. At the time Keats was writing, transcendent ideas were common, discussed, for example, by both the conventional Benjamin Bailey, Keats's friend studying for the clergy, and the unorthodox Leigh Hunt, who urges belief in an afterlife.⁸ It seems reasonable to conclude that Keats entertains such ideas in the Ode, as he does in the Bailey letter and in *Endymion*.

Even if Keats were not convinced of the validity of this idea, he could write as if he thought, at least for the moment, that it were true. Could he not be saying that the Urn is a friend to Man in a world of woe, offering the consolation that beauty is truth in eternity? That is all that Man knows on earth of eternity and all that he needs to know. This reading, requiring an implied "of eternity," offers less difficulty than the reading that Keats speaks to the marble figures on the Urn as if they were on earth. It also encompasses all the other readings except the first (that beauty refers to life). Keats's dream world is what he imagines eternity to be. Also, this world is "Platonic" in the sense that it represents for Keats, at least as a speculation, the core of reality. Most important of all, the world of the Urn itself is a symbol of eternity. Finally, Keats's mode of apprehending eternity is through imaginative perception; therefore, the idea of eternity encompasses this perception.

The question that arises is how Keats could have expected the reader to understand that following "on earth" is an implied "of eternity." Keats could have had such an expectation if in his own mind the Urn is clearly a symbol of eternity. Throughout the poem, he concentrates on eternity, explicitly comparing the Urn to eternity. According to the Bailey letter, beauty ("What the imagination seizes as Beauty") is truth ("must be truth"). This truth, as the letter makes clear, is the truth of eternity. By giving "truth" this special meaning, Keats requires of the reader an understanding of the content of the poem. Under the inspiration of the moment, "mounted on the Wings of Imagination so high," Keats wrote, as in the Bailey letter, what he felt, without concerning himself with the

problem of clarity. If the reader, however, understands that “truth” refers to eternity, he can understand an implied “of eternity” after “on earth.” A reader who considers Keats’s poems and letters knows that Keats would not under any circumstances mean that knowledge of eternity is the only knowledge that Man needs. Keats would have had to mean that earthly intimations of eternity are all the knowledge *of eternity* that Man needs.

This interpretation fully meets the criterion of coherence (relating meaning to the author’s psychological and philosophical stance). Although we cannot establish that Keats believed consistently in eternity, we can establish that he tentatively proposes the idea and that he undoubtedly hoped for the kind of eternity he imagines. In his letter to Bailey (Nov. 1817), he sets forth in detail his concept of the nature of eternity and its relationship to imagination:

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart’s affections and the truth of Imagination – What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not – for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty – In a Word, you may know my favorite Speculation by my first Book and the little song I sent in my last [letter] – which is a representation from the fancy of the probable mode of operating in these Matters.

“What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth” applies to both natural and artistic beauty. But in his examples, Keats chooses the beauty of the content of art, comparable to any product of the imagination, such as an imaginary face, to which he later alludes. The first example Keats gives, Book I of *Endymion*, is a dream of eternal love; the second, the song “O Sorrow,” sent in Keats’s previous letter to Bailey (Nov. 3) and included in Book IV of *Endymion* (146-181), is of the creation by sorrow of natural beauty, such as “white Rose bushes,” “the glow worm Light,” or the song of the nightingale. What the imagination perceives or creates as beauty – whether or not it exists in life – is truth:

The Imagination may be compar’d to Adam’s dream – he awoke and found it truth. I am the more zealous in this affair, because I have never yet been able to perceive how any thing can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning – and yet it must be – Can it be that even the greatest Philosopher ever arrived at his goal without putting aside numerous objections – However it may be, O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts! It is ‘a Vision in the form of Youth’ a Shadow of reality to come – and this consideration has further conv[i]nced me for it has come as auxiliary to another favorite Speculation of mine, that we shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated.

Just as Adam in *Paradise Lost* (VIII, 452-490) awoke from a dream of Eve and found her real, man will awake in eternity to find that imagination is prophetic. Keats more zealously embraces this belief because he has more confidence in intuition than in “consequitive” reasoning, although he concedes that a philosopher, after “putting aside numerous objections,” may discover truth. Keats himself desires a life of sensations rather than of thought. A life of sensations is an anticipation, a “Shadow of

reality to come – a “consideration” that has further convinced him of the truth of imagination because it has occurred in conjunction with another speculation, that eternity is a refinement of earthly happiness: “we shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated.” Keats elaborates in the letter:

Adam's dream will do here and seems to be a conviction that Imagination and its empyreal reflection is the same as human Life and its spiritual repetition. But as I was saying – the simple imaginative Mind may have its rewards in the repeti[tion] of its own silent Working coming continually on the spirit with a fine suddenness – to compare great things with small – have you never by being surprised with an old Melody – in a delicious place – by a delicious voice, fe[el]t over again your very speculations and surmises at the time it first operated on your soul – do you not remember forming to yourself the singer's face more beautiful than it was possible and yet with the elevation of the Moment you did not think so – even then you were mounted on the Wings of Imagination so high that the Prototype must be here after that delicious face you will see. (I, 184-185)⁹

The dream of eternity, like Adam's dream, suffices on earth: its existence is evidence that the relationship between the imagination and eternity is the same as the relationship between refined earthly beauty, a product of the imagination, and its repetition in eternity. The beauty created by imagination is the same as the beauty of eternity. We may imagine the extraordinarily beautiful face of a singer of an old melody, and this imaginative act may be continually repeated. If we hear the song, our imagination is reactivated. Such a continual dream of a beautiful face, like Adam's or Endymion's dream of supreme beauty, is “proof” of the existence of this face in eternity – “the Prototype . . . here after – that delicious face you will see.”

Keats discusses immortality in four other letters. The first letter was written just after the death of this brother Tom in December of 1818: “I have scarce a doubt of immortality of some nature or other – neither had Tom” (II, 4). Later in the same letter he says, “That will be one of the grandeurs of immortality – there will be no space and consequently the only commerce between spirits will be by their intelligence of each other – when they will completely understand each other” (II, 5). In his “Soul-making” letter (April 1819), he assumes the existence of immortality: “I am speaking now in the highest terms for human nature admitting it to be immortal” (II, 102).

Keats's final statements on immortality were made after he had become ill. In a highly emotional letter to Fanny Brawne in June 1820, he expresses his desire for an immortality of love: “I long to believe in immortality I shall never be ab[le] to bid you an entire farewell. If I am destined to be happy with you here – how short is the longest Life – I wish to believe in immortality – I wish to live with you for ever” (II, 293). Finally, a few months before his death, in a letter to Charles Brown, he expresses his despair at leaving her: “The thought of leaving Miss Brawne is beyond every thing horrible – the sense of darkness coming over me – I eternally see her figure eternally vanishing . . . Is there another Life? Shall I awake and

find all this a dream? There must be we cannot be created for this sort of suffering" (II, 345-346).

Keats also expresses hopes of immortality in his poetry. In *Endymion* a man dreams of immortal love and finally achieves it, asserting that love is Man's highest good, not only as an earthly joy but also as a portent of heaven, love having the power "to make / Men's being mortal, immortal" (I, 843-844). The goddess Cynthia promises Endymion "endless heaven" (III, 1027), which he achieves through his love of an Indian maid, who is Cynthia in disguise. In "Epistle to J. H. Reynolds," the "material sublime," an object of beauty such as a sunset, portends eternity. In "Ode to Psyche," love is substituted for religion, and in "Ode to a Nightingale," the Nightingale represents eternity, although Keats is uncertain of the validity of his vision. In *The Fall of Hyperion*, Keats says that everyone "whose soul is not a clod" (I, 13) has visions of eternity, which the poet expresses and thus saves "Imagination from the sable chain / And dumb enchantment" (I, 9-11).

The "eternity" interpretation of the concluding lines of the Ode also meets the criterion of correspondence (accounting for all the parts of the work and their relationship to the whole). As has been frequently noted, Keats in *Endymion* says that heavenly Powers, who seldom reveal themselves to Man, "keep religious state, / . . . And silent as a consecrated urn, / Hold spherical sessions for a season due" (III, 30-33). Grecian urns were, in fact, consecrated, originally used to preserve the ashes of the dead and to depict scenes of vibrant life. As S. R. Swaminathan points out, Leigh Hunt in 1817 published an article on Grecian urns in *The Round Table*, a publication with which Keats was familiar (*Letters*, I, 166). Hunt says that on the urns "were painted the most cheerful actions of the person departed, . . . which seemed to keep up the idea of a vital principle, and to say, "the creature who so did and so enjoyed itself cannot be all gone." The image of a vital principle and of an after-life, was, in fact, often and distinctly repeated on these vessels."¹⁰

The Urn's freshness and purity are stressed in the opening line of the Ode, in the metaphor "unravish'd bride of quietness," which has been interpreted, on the one hand, as praise of the Urn, and on the other, as to some extent a denigration, as an allusion to the Urn's limitations because an actual unravished bride would be in a state of unfulfillment. If, however, we view the terms of Keats's metaphor as applying in only one respect, then it is praise of the Urn: the Urn is ancient but as fresh and young looking as when it was created, a point about both the Urn and its scene of eternal love that Keats stresses. The interpretation of "unravish'd bride" as denigrating is based on the idea that Keats is ambivalent toward the Urn, that although he sees it as beautiful and eternal, he is aware that it is cold and lifeless. According to this view, the Urn in not being a part of the dynamic process of life is separated from both life's suffering and joy.

The idea that Keats is ambivalent toward the Urn is based on the

argument that Keats contrasts eternal static love to transient dynamic love. But this is not what Keats does. In Stanza I, when he directs his attention to the figures, he views them as representative of some kind of idealized life, "Of deities or mortals, or of both, / In Tempe or the dales of Arcady." In Stanza II, when he addresses the figures, he transforms them into symbols of a special kind of eternity. He asks himself what life would be like if it were eternal but static. Contrary to what has usually been said about the Ode, he comes to the conclusion that such an eternally motionless life would be far superior to actual life; although the Lover cannot kiss, his love will always be fair. But even if Keats had found this life wanting, there would be no justification for saying that he denigrates the Urn. Although the figures are represented by the Urn, they are not symbols of art, but of a special kind of eternal life. Keats does not think of art in Stanzas II and III, much less speak unfavorably of it. When he does speak of the art of the Urn in Stanza I, he bestows the highest praise: the Urn can "express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme."

Keats's imagination imposes the limitations (from the standpoint of most readers) of immobility on eternal life, for if he can imagine the figures as alive, he can also imagine them as mobile. He begins in Stanza II to find this motionless life appealing. In Stanza III, he becomes ecstatic, repeating "happy" six times in his enthusiastic praise of it. But we have often been told that such a life, without consummation, would not be satisfying, even though Keats imagines that it would be:

More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting, and for ever young.

For readers to say that such a state would not be pleasurable is irrelevant. Keats imagines that it would be and gives himself wholly to it; as E. C. Pettet says, Keats's ideal is one of eternal anticipation. The limitations of this ideal to others is beside the point.

The interpretation that there is consolation in the consummation of earthly as contrasted to eternal love cannot be justified on the basis of what the poem says:

All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

Consummation or non-consummation is not relevant to these lines. Keats's point is that to him earthly love is painful, having nothing to recommend it, not even consummation. But we should not conclude that it is painful because it is consummated. The lines could, in fact, be a description of longing and frustration, of unsatisfied passion, that leaves a heart high sorrowful and cloyed (in the sense of being filled to bursting). A "burning forehead, and a parching tongue" is a vivid description of such a

state. At any rate, Keats finds no consolation in earthly love. As unsatisfactory as this attitude may be to the reader, it is Keats's attitude. Keats imagines an eternal love of perfect bliss, whose very changelessness appeals to him – the steadfastness of a star, “pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast, / Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,” a sharp contrast to a world “Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies.” Keats in no way sees this love of eternal anticipation as lifeless; his imagination transforms it into eternal euphoria. Although an eternity of sexual love is not commonly imagined, it is a natural and logical ideal for Keats, who devotes his longest poem to eternal sexual love and who idealizes sexual love in “The Eve of St. Agnes,” “Bright Star,” and “Ode to Psyche.”

Keats does not delude himself that he is speaking of actual marble figures; he is not concerned with the permanence and lifelessness of art, but with the everlasting newness and freshness of eternity. For the moment, carried away on the “Wings of Imagination,” he creates an eternal world of perfect bliss, contrasted to the world of suffering. Keats may not be consistent or remain long in this state, but he is at the time constructing a world of eternity that he finds attractive.

His eternity is one shaped according to his own desire, like the eternities he describes in *Endymion*:

Anon they wander'd, by divine converse,
 Into Elysium; vieing to rehearse
 Each one of his own anticipated bliss.
 One felt heart-certain that he could not miss
 His quick gone love, among fair blossom'd boughs.

.....
 Another wish'd, mid that eternal spring,
 To meet his rosy child, with feathery sails.

.....
 Some were athirst in soul to see again
 Their fellow huntsmen o'er the wide champaign
 In times long past. (l. 371-387)

The idea that the eternal love in the Ode is “not human” because “it is *above* all breathing passion” (Brooks, p. 146), “far above” being read as “separated from” rather than “superior to,” is not justified by the context. Keats in Stanza I wonders what kind of life the figures represent. In Stanza II he imagines that they are humans in a life of eternity but they are immobile. His first reaction is to view this immobility as deprivation: “Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss.” But on second thought, he views the situation of the Lover, whose love will remain forever young and fair, as an advantage. Readers, however, often respond as if Keats's initial reaction is maintained throughout. Cleanth Brooks asserts that Keats “is being perfectly fair to the terms of his metaphor” (p. 144). But why is Keats's choice of immobility fairness to the terms of his metaphor? Is he being unfair in lines 5-10, Stanza I, and lines 1-7, Stanza IV, when he imagines the figures as mobile? The fixed marble figures naturally suggest to him the idea of immobility, but since he views the figures as alive, his

imagination is not restricted by the Urn. The situation is not determined by the Urn but by Keats's imagination. At the time that Keats wrote the Ode, his life was uncertain and unhappy. It is not surprising that he imagines an eternal love that has to him none of the disadvantages of earthly love. The eternal love of expectancy that he desires, as E. C. Pettet points out, is one that no mystic or idealist had imagined. But it is the one Keats chooses. To say that Keats's ideal is "not human" is true in the sense that it is eternal and unconsummated but untrue in the sense that it is lifeless or unsatisfying to Keats.

In the Stanza following the love scene, Keats shifts his vision, returning to the perspective of Stanza I, viewing the marble figures as representative of idealized life. He again addresses the Urn ("Who are these coming to the sacrifice?") and then the marble figures: "To what green altar, O mysterious priest, / Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies . . .?" The scene Keats portrays is a communal religious experience, paralleling an example of the "material sublime" in his "Epistle to J. H. Reynolds": "Some Titian colours touch'd into real life," a religious ceremony involving the sacrifice of a "milk-white heifer," witnessed by mariners who join in "hymn with those on land" (20-25). The scene in the Ode of the priest leading the heifer to sacrifice recalls the "happy pieties" of an earlier religious Age, with its "fond believing lyre, / When holy were the haunted forest boughs" ("Ode to Psyche"). The religious scene in the Ode is associated in Keats's mind with Man's concern for eternity. In *Endymion*, for example, Keats describes a scene in which worshipers gather and a priest prays to Pan as one who can give knowledge of eternity:

Dread opener of the mysterious doors
 Leading to universal knowledge see. . . .
 The many that are come to pay their vows
 With leaves about their brows. (l 288-292)

Whatever may be the response of modern taste to the scene of the heifer being led to sacrifice, Keats views it as a scene of religious communion, of the "happy pieties" of a believing Age.

In the last three lines of the Stanza, however, Keats introduces a disturbing note, picturing the eternally desolate town from which the worshipers have come, shifting his perspective to the figures as representative of eternal life. But instead of concentrating on the "happy pieties" of the worshipers, paralleling the ecstasy of the motionless Lover in Stanza III, he imagines the figures as eternal exiles and their town as forever desolate. Whereas the eternity of Stanza III is one of ecstasy, the eternity of Stanza IV is one of desolation. The scene of the happy worshipers is suddenly transformed into the vision of the desolate town—similar to his response in "Ode to a Nightingale," when, just as it seems to him that it would be "rich to die," he is jolted into an awareness that were he to die, he would "have ears in vain," becoming to the bird's "high requiem . . . a

sod." Perhaps eternity is, after all, only emptiness, a silent desolation. Even in a moment of inspiration, when he is "mounted on the Wings of Imagination so high," his doubts assert themselves.

In Stanza V, however, he thoroughly recovers his vision. As he beholds the Urn's form and the scenes it depicts, he compares it to eternity, to which Man must respond intuitively, not intellectually (it "dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity"). Keats says in the Bailey letter that he does not understand "how anything can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning" and states his preference for a "Life of Sensations," which intuition tells him is a "Shadow of reality to come" (I, 185). In "Epistle to J. H. Reynolds," he complains that although he has tried to philosophize, he finds that the deepest questions cannot "to the will / Be settled, but they tease us out of thought" (76-77). To try to understand eternity rationally, to philosophize, like his friend Bailey, is for him useless. The silent Urn, like his *Life of Sensations*, intuitively suggests to him that an eternity of beauty exists.

The paradox "Cold Pastoral" following the comparison of the Urn to eternity has generally been interpreted as a literal description, as a pastoral that should be warm but is cold. Keats, however, has consistently praised the Urn as an object of beauty and as a narrator of tales, "more sweetly" told than those of poetry. "Cold Pastoral" is an expression of his amazement that such a resistant medium as cold marble is able to portray so vividly the vibrance and warmth of summer scenes. A reader objecting to this interpretation might argue that Keats has had a lapse as in Stanza IV particularly since "Cold Pastoral" directly follows "eternity." What makes this interpretation unlikely is that Keats has not changed his vision of the ecstatic scene of love in Stanza III nor his opinion of the artistic power of the Urn, which can "express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme." If the Urn portrays a pastoral that is cold, it cannot be said to surpass the power of poetry. But if cold marble portrays a warm pastoral, then Keats's praise of the Urn's power is justified. Since Keats in the last five lines of the Stanza is enthusiastic in his admiration of the Urn, it is likely that "Cold Pastoral" is intended as an accolade.

The final lines of the Ode raise the problem not only of the meaning of "Beauty is truth" but also of the way in which the urn is a "friend to man." If we say that the Urn is a friend because it is art, we give a partial answer, but we do not convey the sense of the whole passage: the Urn remains "in midst of other woe" and delivers to Man a message of significance. The Urn's role as a friend is dependent at least partially on what it says. If the Urn utters the falsehood, in Keats's view, that art is all that Man needs to know, then in this respect it is not a friend. What it says sustains Man in a world of woe. Since the Urn as both a work of art and narrator ("historian") portends eternity, what it says is likely to relate to its role: beauty in its world, an emblem of eternity, is truth.

This interpretation is supported by the statement that occurs at the

beginning of Stanza II: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter." This praise of the power of imagination is an echo of an idea expressed in the Bailey letter – that an imagined face, a "Prototype" of the hereafter, is more beautiful than an actual face. An imagined melody, like the imagined love of Stanza III, far surpasses reality. The imagination creates what is most beautiful and its creations are a reflection of eternity: "What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth." Far from being a blemish on the poem, the concluding lines contribute to its power, climaxing Keats's celebration of eternity.

The Ode as a whole is more concerned with eternity than with art, itself a symbol of eternity. The first four lines of Stanza I and the first five of Stanza V are devoted to the Urn as art. The last six lines of Stanza I and the first seven of Stanza IV portray the figures as representative of some kind of idealized life. The first four lines of Stanza II, praising the power of imagination, are transitional, moving from the figures as representative of life to the figures as symbols of eternal life. The last six lines of Stanza II, the first seven of Stanza III (a contrast to the final three lines on earthly love), and the last three of Stanza IV portray the figures as symbols of eternity. The final five lines of Stanza V imply that the Urn's function transcends its role as a work of art.

This interpretation provides a logical explanation of the phrases "on earth" and "all ye need to know." The phrase "on earth" is not mere filler, but is substantive, implying a contrast between earthly and transcendent life, at a time when such ideas were common. Keats discussed the question of eternity in the fall of 1817 with Bailey and stated that he preferred his intuition of eternity to Bailey's abstract and traditional concept. Although he may not have held firmly the belief that beauty or earthly happiness refined is the nature of eternity, he intensely desired such an eternity. The Ode implies that this eternity exists and that awareness of its existence is a consolation to Man.

As Hirsch says in *Validity in Interpretation*, the aim of interpretation is not certainty, but probability. This is the principle on which I base my argument. Of the six interpretations, the one relating beauty and truth to eternity is, on the basis of the evidence, most probably valid. Without wrenching the syntax, we can read the final lines as "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" in eternity – that is all you know or need to know on earth of eternity. The Ode interpreted in this way becomes a coherent and powerful work, with the concluding lines fully integrated into the poem as a whole.

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Notes

1. E. D. Hirsch, *Validity of Interpretation*, (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1967), p. 171.

2. As a matter of general interest, I give the results of my survey. I examined 158 interpretations (extending from the mid-nineteenth century to the present) of "Ode on a

Grecian Urn." Fifty-four of them either did not discuss the concluding lines or did not state a viewpoint. The remaining 104 (56 of which are excerpted in Harvey Lyon's *Keats' Well-Read Urn* [New York: Henry Holt, 1958]) are divided as follows: 7, in life; 9, in Keats's dream world; 5, in Platonic reality; 10, in the world of the Urn; 61, in imaginative or artistic perception; and 12, in eternity. A surprisingly low figure is that for Platonic reality. Not all interpreters who use the word "Platonism" are in fact committed to that view. I have included no interpretation that is not definitely committed to one of the views I have listed. But an interpretation might, for example, concentrate on Keats's dream world, yet interpret the concluding lines as referring to imaginative or artistic perception.

3. *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), I, p. 102. Hereafter cited in the text. An example of the view that beauty refers to life is Pratap Biswas' "Keats's Cold Pastoral," *UTQ*, 47 (Winter, 1977-78), pp. 95-111.

4. E. C. Pettet, *On the Poetry of Keats* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1957), p. 333.

5. Christopher Caldwell, *Illusion and Reality* (New York: International Publishers, 1947), p. 94.

6. Martha Shackford, "The *Ode on a Grecian Urn*," *KSJ*, 4 (Winter 1955), p. 12.

7. Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947), pp. 150, 140, 150.

8. In "Death and Burial," *The Round Table*, 1817, and "Life after Death," *The London Journal*, 1834. Quoted by S. R. Swaminathan, "The Odes of Keats," *KSMB*, 12 (1961), pp. 45-46.

9. The most thorough and helpful interpretation of the Adam's dream letter is Newell Ford's in *The Prefigurative Imagination of John Keats* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1966), pp. 20-38.

10. In "Death and Burial." Quoted by Swaminathan, pp. 45-46.