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Study of Ode On A Grecian Urn by John Keats

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Appreciate criticism at its best, you will be interested
in seeing what Charles Baudelaire thought of the poem.
"The Will with a Right" in particular, and how it
matches the ideal.
"A thing of beauty is a joy forever"

This one line says more about Ode on a Grecian Urn than anyone can ever say.

There is no imitation of genius.

I shall only try to set forth here the ideas and opinions; the sensations and responses I have felt during the hundreds of times I have dreamed over and read this poem.
The Ode on a Grecian Urn is symbolic of the unending quest for an ideal which can be realized. The ideal, in this case, is beauty and the permanence of joy in a world where beauty constantly assumes changing patterns, and joy is but a memory of former days.

John Keats, in this poem, attempted to capture not only permanence, about which I shall have something to say later on, but beauty. He felt that beauty lives only in the human eye, or, is evident only in nature where the evanescent, chameleon-like, ever-mutant beauty of the live and growing organism can be appreciated. In nature, this beauty can be either human, animal, or plant, and, although nature itself is permanent, these individuations of nature never achieve permanence. This can, I think, be contrasted to the idealized beauty of the urn; the beauty of form, of craftsmanship, and of human endeavor.

An urn is an especially well-suited form for this creation of the illusionary reality and permanence of beauty. On it beauty can be integrated into the present from the past. In this manner, a certain stability is achieved: the stability of form. There can also be suggested the Keatsian philosophy of beauty. I realize philosophical ideas are elusive, and hard to isolate in a poem that is primarily intended to appeal to the senses, but, nevertheless, they do appear in this poem. In order to present the philosophy of beauty, John Keats fused the natural symmetry and sensuousness of the urn itself with the natural grace, symmetry, and beauty of the representations on it. Out of this fusion of the two forms of beauty, the ideal Beauty is presented as a product of man's mind and of his range of being. We have here, too, the visual image translated into symbols; the symbols of language to represent a mental picture. There is, perhaps, a
hint of the infinity of application that the human mind can evolve of its own innate beauty when it contemplates a work of art visually.

It is difficult to say definitely what beauty meant for Keats. It certainly was associated with passion and with life. More specifically, in this Ode it is Grecian beauty that is not only re-created and reaffirmed in the minds of all who read the poem, but given life, endued with the spirit of ancient Greece. The figures on the urn become, in time, old friends, who are as much a part of the imagination as are the neighbors living next-door. This revivification of the life of Greece was a part of the Keatsian attitude towards beauty. The life in Attic Greece has been given meaning for us today. The old adage about times changing but people remaining essentially the same is especially applicable here. These overtones, these associations of past to present, more than the creation of the sensuous beauty of the urn in magical language, are the core of the poem.

I can perhaps state these ideas more clearly if I say that they have a symbolic purpose: the relationship of history to Man; of Man to Nature; and of the unattainable to the attained.

History is related to Man because the actions on the urn, the scenes, are timeless and might have occurred in any age, in any land. The message here was just as poignantly coming from the Greece of antiquity to Keats in 1819 as the translation of it in Ode on a Grecian Urn is to readers today. Beauty is now seen as being permanently a part of man's life, appearing in all ages, exemplified in all things, and although the individual, concrete objects, the sounds, or forms that have beauty are transient, their message is permanent; the impression they leave on the sensory
organs has become innate in man and will act continually upon
his imagination and his intellect.

Here, in the figures on the urn, there is arrested action,
and this is understood as arrested action in relation to its
source and specific point of emanation, and in relation to life
today. The urn, as historian, is able to "express a tale more
sweetly than our rhyme", and still be, itself, an object of mystery,
of beauty, and a subject of poetical legend.

The relationship of Man to Nature is in some respects para-
doxical. Impermanent objects and impermanent aspects of Nature;
the people, the heifer, the young love, the richness of the season
and the full promise of the early Spring, given a permanence of form.
Therefore, in consideration of this poem, the impermanent may be
called permanent. Nature, of course, is considered as permanent
(or at least as near to an approximation of permanence as anything,
within our knowledge, can be) and Mankind is also surmised to have
permanence. It is, indeed, rare that individuations; specific men
and natural objects should be given permanence. This has been done
by making them appear real, and it is this startling reality of things
decayed thousands of years past; this imaginistic approach to history
that relates Man to Nature, and the individuation to the whole, in
a very fine perspective. One brief minute of time has been captured
on the urn as in the poem; the eternal elements which are ever the
essence of any specific instant. This instant has also become all
time, all history, past, present and forever.

The relationship of the unattainable to the attained is shown
in:

"heard melodies are sweet,
but
"heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
not to the sensual ear, but more endear'd,
pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone."

The same relationship is shown in the purely physical situa-
tion as in the stimulating mental situation:

"Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
though winning near the goal..."

Keats realized that much of life's happiness is in the promise
of things to be, and not in the immediate fulfillment of ideals and
wishes. Thus, there is here a plaintive note; a part of a strain
where joy and sadness meet in the perfection of illusion, and not
in the all-too-often bitter experience of reality. Where the dream,
or the hope exists there can be no disappointment, no unhappy cir-
cumstance to disturb, blemish, or destroy the creator, or the firm-
ly established dreamland of the mind. The urn with its figures and
pastoral scenes is the attained; the permanent beauty, the eternal
hope; the achieved portion of a minute. The figures themselves
represent the beauty of the unknown and are symbol of all that
is unattained, unfulfilled, unrealized; in fine, the ideal implic-
ation of the average life.

It is important to understand what Keats did with the "music
of silence." Thomas Hood has classified silence into two types;
the silence of nature where no man has been; the silence where
man has been. This latter is an awe-filled silence, "self-conscious
and alone." There is none of this awe and fear of silence in Ode
on a Grecian Urn, or anywhere in Keats' writing. John Keats,
apostle of beauty, thought of silence as something so very beautiful
that it became almost other-worldly. His descriptions of silence have
a magic about them that is unique. In Endymion there is this ex-
quise passage conveying a sense of silence that is pure music:
"And as a willow keeps
A patient watch over the stream that creeps
Windingly by it, so the quiet maid
Held her in peace; so that a whispering blade
Of grass, a wailful gnat, a bee bustling
Down in the blue-bells, or a wren light rustling
Among sere leaves and twigs, might all be heard."

In *Ode on a Grecian Urn* it is a consecrated silence that is the atmosphere:

"Thou still unravaged bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time, ...."

This first line indicates the tone, and, throughout the entire poem, the measure of silence increases until it permeates all:

"Thou, silent form, doth tease us out of thought
As doth eternity ........."

With this final silence is also the inadequacy Keats must have felt; the inability of words to express the perfect silence of the permanent joy.

I wonder as I read this poem how much emphasis, how much importance Keats attached to a moment of time that was completely realized and ecstatically happy. Probably, as this poem is living proof, he considered the only happiness that of sensuous appreciation of the present, or an idealized sensuous attitude towards the future. It is, perhaps, sad that there is no realization of the happiness depicted on the urn and can, naturally, never be.

In this, however, is the achievement of a higher, more ideal, more spiritual happiness: the joy of created permanence. By means of this idea alone Keats has given us more than a poem; he has given us a system to live by; a gleam of what Beauty is, and of what Beauty can be.

Before making any general statements concerning this poem as an entity, I must first say something of the famous, or, per-
haps, infamous, last two lines:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"—that is all
Ye know on earth and all ye need to know.

Beauty, of course, included emotions and thoughts which were sensuously felt. John Keats worshipped sensuous beauty to such an extent that spiritual attributes were granted to it as his imagination served as intellect. By means of the imagination working upon lovely objects, or beautiful emotions, there was taken from the soul, or the essence of beauty. He further felt that whatever his imagination seized upon had to be Truth because the imagination was that faculty through which he saw and interpreted the world about him, and, consequently, he relied upon it. The world appeared to him as wave upon wave of beauty crashing upon the hidden beach of his mind, his imagination. Therefore, it was his imagination which created truth out of the sensations and ideas entering it. His emotional reactions evidently were trusted much more than his intellectual reactions and it is on the basis of these that he equilibrates truth and beauty.

I remember one, a long time ago, I read an article by Steven Spender in which he attacked the last two lines of the Ode on a Grecian Urn because he felt that Keats had departed from the realm of poetic truth and gone over to general truth. Spender maintained that this spoiled the integrity of the poem for him and that it created a falsity, a hollow tone. Now this is really not too valid an argument because it is impossible to think of these last two lines as distinct from the body of the poem. What pertinence can the differentiation between categories of truth have on the appreciation of a poem of this quality? It seems only a way of est-
establishing a basis for criticising the workmanship, and methods of craftsmanship which Keats used.

When viewed in perspective there is an atmosphere of harmony, of ethereal music pervading the poem. The external structure of words is more a masterwork of music than a body of linguistic achievement. The internal harmony, the natural associations, the creation of perfect silence, the rapport between the Greece of yesterday and any vale of today, the life, the breathing ecstasy of the unattained, all contribute to the final picture. A picture which is a symphony, and which awakens the mind to the infinity of beauty. He has done more than transcribe sensuous emotion by means of the imagination, he has blended the finite and the infinite, assimilated the eternal and the transient into the pure spirit of poetry, which, having once been appreciated, is forever a part of the soul of the reader.