

Ode on a Grecian Urn

'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is the most famous ekphrastic poem in the English language. As a verbal rendering of a visual artwork, it belongs in a genre that begins with Homer's admiring description of Achilles' shield and culminates in twentieth-century meditations on the Old Masters by poets like Ashbery and Auden. The psychology of ekphrasis is characterized as much by rivalry as encomium, however; it is an exercise that pits the narrative talents of the word against the spatial beauty of the image. The paragone, as it was termed by Leonardo, is apparent from the very outset of Keats's ode, where the speaker concedes that the urn 'canst thus express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme' (3-4). By the end of the poem, he not only manages to escape the museum purgatory of 'silence and slow time' (2), but translate the urn into a silky epigram that mimics the object's own circular shape – 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty.' In so doing, he performs a daring sleight of hand, an act of ventriloquism that enables him to unseat the urn as oracle.

Keats's interest in the fine arts had always been keen, but it was sharpened by his friendship with the painters Joseph Severn and B. R. Haydon, who on occasion would accompany him to the British Museum to see the Elgin Marbles. He admired the statuary and the bas relief fragments from the Parthenon frieze, especially one depicting a 'mysterious priest' and 'a heifer lowing at the skies' (33). He also found inspiration in the Townley and Portland Vases, recent acquisitions by the museum. The scenes depicted on the surface of these objects as well as those on the Sosibios and Borghese Vases, which he knew secondhand from books of engravings, fired his imagination, though no exact source for Keats's urn has ever been discovered. The annual Cambridge and Oxford Prize Poem competitions provide yet another important context for the ode (1810-1820). Their remit at this time was to compose a poem on classical art and architecture. Two winning entries, for example, are titled, 'Parthenon' and 'The Statue of the Dying Gladiator'. While he was not eligible for either competition, we may imagine Keats thinking of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' as his own submission for the Newdigate and Cambridge Medals. It is fitting that the poem was first published in the *Annals of the Fine Arts* (Jan. 1820), where one or two of the medal winners had also appeared.

Matthew Coulton's dramatic reading of the ode runs the gamut of ekphrastic response – from cautious approach to passionate identification and finally philosophical reflection. He models the extremes of emotion that the urn's scene summons, the quick in-and-out movements that bind and then release the speaker from the thrall of the unravished bride. Do I join the panting figures in their sensual pageantry or step back, admitting that they are stone? It's the aesthetic toggle that defines all good art-writing and that Keats explored with such intensity in his best poetry.

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