

Suspended Satisfaction: "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and the Construction of Art

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Those of us who teach early nineteenth-century British literature to undergraduates have much to ponder as we approach Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." How much should we emphasize close reading and usher our students into the presence of the well-wrought urn, whether in a consecrating or deconstructive spirit? How much should we take up a variety of other contexts, such as the genres of the ode or the romantic lyric, the reflection on romantic Hellenism, the place of Keats in a museum-going public, the poet's reflections on the distinctiveness of aesthetic value, or the place of the ode within his highly self-conscious poetic career? Ideally, one should be able to invite students into the poem as a carefully wrought artifact while also making it clear that writing poetry that demands such close reading represents a literary strategy of interest in its own right. To that end, in recent years I have taught Keats in a course on the literature and culture of the Regency period, alongside such authors as Byron, Austen, Scott, Hazlitt, Cobbett, and Clare. By the time students read Keats, they are already aware that the period sustained a wide array of literary practices, each performing a specific strategy in relation to the performance of social rank, the display of cultural capital, and the construction of emergent reading audiences. Thus while students are drawn into Keats's aesthetic, so congruent it seems with their own, they remain at least dimly aware that it emanates from his specific social position as an aspiring "cockney" poet.

To emphasize the cultural overtones of Keats's characteristic themes, on a day preceding our discussion of the ode I assign a portion of Colin Campbell's *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*. Campbell argues that modern consumerism creates a distinctive form of desire: the day-dream, in which one imagines a plausible future pleasure that would arise from purchasing or consuming a particular commodity. Such a day-dream is not satisfied by the commodity itself, which can never quite match the imagined pleasure it is meant to bring. The consumer thus perpetually longs for something beyond the reach of any real satisfaction. But Campbell goes on to argue that the result is not frustration, but rather a pleasure one takes in day-dreaming itself; the deferral of satisfaction makes possible a hedonistic delight one takes in a purely imagined satisfaction. Furthermore, day-dreaming alters the status of commodities; rather than fulfilling a prior longing, "many of the cultural products offered for sale in modern societies are in fact consumed because they serve as aids to the construction of day-dreams" (92). Such commodities differ little from advertising images, films, novels, or other representations; all encourage the consumer to construct and constantly revise an "'as-if' world" to inhabit" (93).

Campbell's theory of consumerism provides a useful framework for our discussion of the theme of dreaming in portions of *Endymion*, the catalog of

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artifacts in "Sleep and Poetry," the central problems of "The Eve of St. Agnes," the suburban setting for the odes, and Keats's position more generally as a partially educated Londoner aspiring to a position of literary prominence. The close match between Campbell's argument and Keats's characteristic themes enables students to locate Keats's poetry within a world of consumption and desire familiar to them and to recognize the serious social concerns embedded in Keatsian lyricism. This approach gains special force when we begin our discussion of "The Eve of St. Agnes," whose themes take on a vivid new dimension in light of Campbell's argument. Why do the couple never eat from the table of dainties? Why should Madeline prefer her dream over consummation? What exactly happens to the lovers in the key moment when Porphyro invades her dream? Why does the poem represent its own ornate literariness in the gorgeous aesthetic displays it describes, as if to suggest that it resembles the ornate window before which Madeline prays? Is it to be consumed as an object of pleasure, or simply viewed adoringly, in its iconic splendor, transforming the reader into a ravished spectator? What is poetry's status in a world shaped in part by the pleasure of anticipation?

Such a discussion prepares students for the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," where Keats takes up similar questions, apparently suggesting that unheard music and unconsummated desire is preferable. Here he embraces what Campbell calls day-dreaming, finding pleasure in the endless moment of imagined satisfaction rather than in satisfaction itself. But in that case, the urn becomes a magnificent provocation, an exemplary representation, which takes us beyond any possible satisfaction into a virtual space of erotic plenitude beyond the body, suspending its use value entirely in favor of the viewer's construction of an imagined bliss.

But the opening stanza immediately complicates this reading. The poem suspends knowledge as well: Who are these men and gods? Where are they? What does their depicted activity signify? The questions never find an answer; the problem of significance is suspended as ruthlessly as the demand for erotic satisfaction. The poem thus introduces another thematic, at once parallel to consumer desire and distinct from it: the suspension of particular meaning, historical reference, or mythic import. The urn can defer satisfaction precisely because it emerges from an aesthetic domain without specific content. It solicits, but does not answer, our inquiries; it excites us to knowledge, but withholds what it promises. An exemplary teacher of Negative Capability (a concept one can hardly resist teaching in conjunction with this poem), the urn is also the incarnation of Art, of aesthetic value determined not by its social location but by its power to dissolve all such determinations.

In the second and third stanzas, the poem draws attention to this aspect of the urn by drawing attention to the frozen temporality of its images. Here the structure of consumer desire is not only provoked by the urn but also depicted in its own images of suspended animation: the figures on its surface desire without

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consummation, much as one listens to its soft pipes though one cannot hear them. This link between erotic suspension and the plastic arts changes both. For one thing, this parallel transforms the temporal stasis of the image into an allegory of deferred satisfaction; the aesthetic category of the image begins to represent not so much a specific aesthetic mode among others but a form of desire that prefers anticipation to consummation. Here art has become an allegory for daydreaming. Yet for this very reason, the urn is not simply a commodity among others, for by waiving all answers regarding its significance, it also waives its claim to satisfy our desire. Rather than offering itself up for sale, only to be replaced by another commodity, the urn interrupts the logic of economic exchange and represents the structure of commodity desire itself, imaging Campbell's argument, as it were, in the youth who forever draws near the goal. It is as if the urn stands in for that absent object for which the consumer ever seeks and which must remain absent for desire to renew itself, and does so precisely because it empties itself out and, like the youth's goal, remains forever out of reach. As a result, the urn pushes beyond the logic of consumer desire: where the consumer can at least hope for an imagined consummation from a given commodity, the urn makes that satisfaction impossible and emphasizes the paradoxical bliss one takes in an anticipation that is never fulfilled. The purest form of consumer desire takes one beyond the commodity into the aesthetic artifact per se, from exchange or consummation into Art.

But how does Art escape the logic of the commodity? Here it is useful to tell students that Keats was probably inspired to write this poem after visiting the British Museum and seeing Greek artifacts there. While the urn is an object among others, an artifact with its own material and cultural history, it does not address the viewer in the same way as an object in a shop window. The context of the museum suspends it from commodity exchange, just as the immense temporal distance between it and the viewer takes it forever outside the context of everyday use. The passage of time—not to mention the overvaluation of all things Greek—has consecrated this object. It seems that the artifact, simply by enduring so long, has managed to suspend its ordinary relation to "slow time" and has gained the power to address us on behalf of eternity itself; it has become a sublime object, that elusive thing desiring subjects seek but necessarily fail to grasp. Thus the poem articulates what one might call the ideology of the museum, seeing the latter not as a specific cultural institution but as the repository of objects of transcendental value. As an institution, the museum separates objects we are to regard as culturally significant from the everyday objects outside its walls; its task is to open up a space of permanent significance, to cut objects off from their ordinary historical location and give them a place within a story or schema of absolute value. The poem participates in this task in its final two stanzas, where it first emphasizes the urn's evacuation of a presumed historical community, depicted as an abandoned village, and then places it in that zone of eternal significance, causing it to address the community of all the mortal generations who can receive its message.

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The final stanza's reference to the wasting of generations brings us back to the problem of embodiment, previously broached in the lines on erotic consummation. The urn can embody suspended satisfaction precisely because, as an artifact, it can endure much longer than human bodies can. Its privilege derives from its power to suspend desire more radically than any desiring subject can ever do. It is radically other to any human being, any generation, any historical moment, and, as the first stanza suggests, to any particular knowledge. Thus the notorious final lines tell us that truth is found in whatever suspends knowledge: the urn's message is its power to tease us out of thought. These final lines constitute a critique and manifesto in the same gesture, showing that the urn has no wisdom to offer and yet celebrating its austere sublimity. The urn survives through time to tell us nothing at all, yet the absence of any message is more enduring than any historically located insight. The urn speaks not for a lived eternity, for a subject who has entered into bliss, but rather for a technique of suspending temporal succession; the eternity we find there is only one we attribute to it, one we posit in order to countenance our own place in a sequence of dying generations. If the urn is thus the product of an aesthetic sleight of hand, it does not promise refuge from time except in our own power to project eternity onto it and then hear its message reflected back into our own historical present. In that way, Art makes eternity available to the dying generations through their power to take pleasure in a longing whose fulfillment is itself.

In the remaining days of our discussion of Keats, as we take up the later odes, *Lamia*, *The Fall of Hyperion*, and "To Autumn," the students and I have many opportunities to complicate this reading of the poem. I have found that even when I try to push beyond the above reading, students remember mostly what I have outlined above, and thus that it is better to complicate the poem retrospectively, when they can see Keats apparently reconsidering the stance he takes there. In recent years, students have been especially interested in rethinking the ode once they encounter the ravaged face of Moneta or read of the speaker's horror at having to endure the temporal stasis of the fallen Saturn. By finding new levels to this poem in retrospect, primarily by seeing in it anticipations of Keats's later and apparently more de-idealizing insights, students see the ode less as a finished text than one in a series of complex statements that approach certain themes in differing ways. When they see how often Keats inverts the poem, opens it back up, or plunders it, they begin to grasp it as part of the difficult process of cultural reading that we share with him. Rather than a well-wrought urn or an equally well-wrought deconstruction of any such figure, the poem thus becomes an open-ended text, at once subverting and reinforcing its hypercanonic status through the mobility of its claims.

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