

TIME AND THE GRECIAN URN

By K. M. HAMILTON

O fearful meditation! Where, alack,
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?

EVERY poet meets Time the Enemy at some point, but the "fearful meditation" of Shakespeare's *Sonnet LXV* was a constant spectre for Keats. Keats felt the compulsion to create and knew that the necessary condition for doing it would probably be denied him. Hence the uneasy resignation of

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,

and the tense concern of "O for ten years. . . How much toil? how many days!" It was Milton's sonnet on his blindness over again—or rather the octet of it without the sestet, for Keats had no faith in an all-sufficing Providence. There was very much more than the sweet singer in Keats, whose wish for a life of sensation rather than thought was by no means granted him. Menaced by the tyranny of time, he fought back with a supple and questing intelligence. His poetry combined with a glad response to life a search for an answer to life's perplexities and a resolution of life's tragedy, and in the great *Odes* he left a record of how far he was able to reconcile the two approaches to the universe within one poetic vision.

Among the *Odes*, the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is unique in giving us a direct "message"—the famous, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." Since Keats endorses what the Urn says, telling us that it is all we know and all we need to know, there can be no doubt that the "message" is a genuine expression of Keats' own belief. Yet what the message means, how defensible it is, and how it is related to the total "meaning" of the poem—about these things there is the greatest possible disagreement. Mr. Middleton Murry's essay, 'Beauty is Truth', in his valuable *Studies in Keats* (1930) gathered together a mixed bag of interpretations, and stated the author's own conclusions, which in turn have been as violently rejected as the ones he found unacceptable. Among so many conflicting claims to unravel the riddle of the Urn there may seem little hope of doing more than adding one extra voice to the critical Babel. If, however, we assume that the underlying theme of the *Ode* is the possibility

of a victory over time, an indirect approach to the problem may be rewarding.

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," says the Urn. Were we to take the equation strictly and without regard to the context we would have to believe that Keats was a Platonist, or more accurately an ultra-Platonist of the sort Plato called a "Friend of Forms". In a world with no reality (Truth) apart from certain eternal values (Beauty), temporal existence would be totally unreal except for the degree to which it participated in eternity. The message of the Urn would indeed be all we knew or needed to know, because everything else would be illusion, and the only difficulty would be that there could be no "we" to know the message. But the context of the message is decidedly temporal: it is to be voiced, "in midst of other woe than ours," in the future when Keats's generation has been wasted by age, and it is to be known "on earth." And from what we know about Keats it is fairly obvious that he never doubted the reality of the transient world and the power of time to destroy what *is*. The message of the Urn certainly cannot be taken quite literally.

If the beauty that is truth does not abolish time, it may transcend it. According to Robert Bridges, the Urn teaches the supremacy of ideal Art over Nature, static perfection being contrasted with a transient existence. At the same time, Bridges admitted that this lesson was not set out in the *Ode* very clearly, for "its amplification in the poem is unprogressive, monotonous, and scattered." Such a judgment appeared to Mr. Murry to prove that Bridges was on the wrong track altogether; he was looking in vain for the "amplification" of a theme he himself had read into the *Ode*. Moreover, Mr. Murry was able to show that the thought *ars longa, vita brevis* was one that held no attraction for Keats. The sonnet *On Visiting the Tomb of Burns* proved that beauty which called up no answering response in the consciousness of the beholder was for Keats "cold beauty", bringing with it only pain. So far from ideal Art being superior to Nature, Art's sole value lay in its being subject to the needs of human existence.

For Mr. Murry the Urn is a symbol of "the eternal aspect of things," an aspect "beyond thought" that ushers us into the presence of profundities beginning with capital letters: Love, Spirit, Fact, the Real, Perfection, Existence, Mind, Philosophy and Being. The Philosopher distinguishes Being from Existence. In the Realm of Being, though not outside it, Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty. And it is the function of Art to take

us into the Realm of Being. Not Art, but the Imaginative vision of Nature is supreme over Nature. Thus Mr. Murry recognizes that the issue revolves round eternity and its relation to time, even though, in order to bring in Philosophy, he feels that he must introduce Being and Existence. It is probable that the case for the creative imagination could be more plausibly stated by arguing from the primacy of existence over being rather than *vice versa*, since imagination is dependent on sensory intuition. But, whatever the vagaries of his terminology, Mr. Murry's argument depends in the last resort upon his ability to show that Keats was able to transcend the temporal world entirely by means of his imaginative vision of eternity.

Mr. Murry does not, in fact, show this. There is an obvious discrepancy between the meaning of the *Ode*, as Mr. Murry expounds it, and the words Keats actually wrote. The mood of the poem, says Mr. Murry, is the sheer opposite of cold beauty: "the beauty is warm, the pain is done." Yet the Urn is called by Keats a "Cold Pastoral," the little town depicted there is "desolate" and the lover has to be told not to "grieve." The vision which the *Ode* embodies, Mr. Murry says, involves "utter detachment" and "a great renunciation"; it is a vision "from which all passion has been dissolved away" and which "is unclouded by any desire or regret" so that we are "unmoved spectators." Yet Mr. Murry also says that Keats "envies and grieves" for his creations, "whose felicity has its tinge of sorrow." His explanation is that Eternity can only be represented in the guise of Existence—the symbol is not the reality. This is quite inadmissible. Symbols may be imperfect means of communication, but they need not be misleading ones. They do not have to describe one thing as though it were another, and, as far as they do so, they cease to be symbols at all. A vision of impassive detachment cannot be conveyed *simpliciter* in terms of impassioned involvement. If the Urn is a focus for emotions of regret and longing it cannot at the same time typify untroubled bliss, and an interpretation which assumes that it does has lost sight of its starting-point.

This argument was taken up by Dr. F. R. Leavis, who, in an essay in *Revaluations*, (1936) found Mr. Murry guilty of the same fault with which Mr. Murry had charged Bridges: that of neglecting the text of the *Ode* in the interests of a personal theory. Speculations based on the *Letters*, he pointed out, were no substitute for the critic's chief task of analysing the evidence of the poem itself. Dr. Leavis completely reversed Mr. Murry's

findings. Instead of a triumphant discovery of "a thought beyond thought" involving "a great renunciation" and transcending human misery, he concluded that the *Ode* evaded the challenge of the world's ills altogether:

The Urn for Keats is the incitement and support for a day-dream; the dream of a life that, without any drawbacks, shall give him all he desires.

The poem, for Dr. Leavis, is "the attempt to get it both ways" in an equivocal victory over time. The dream-world of art becomes a substitute for the uncomfortable world of real life, where desires are thwarted and the law of non-contradiction holds. "Getting it both ways" comes when the limitations of the world the poet has created are ignored, when the lover who can never enjoy his love is also spoken of as happy in the possession of it. The world of the imagination thus becomes an easy refuge from the perplexities of life, instead of transcending them or resolving them. On this level, "Beauty is Truth" simply ushers in the realm of Art for Art's sake, which Arthur Symons believed to be the proper creation of Keats—a Keats who "was not troubled about his soul, or any other metaphysical question." Dr. Leavis sees that there was much more in Keats than the Aestheticism which was later to be founded upon his example, for Keats never allowed day-dreaming to extinguish his love of life. But he maintains that in the *Ode* the aesthete in Keats is uppermost.

Probably Dr. Leavis scores a point too easily by saying that Keats wanted a life without "disagreeables." Keats certainly made it a test of true art that it could make "disagreeables evaporate." But his instance of this was *King Lear*. He did not want to exclude the unpleasant but to triumph over it. Similarly, the *Letters* furnish evidence about the kind of person Keats was when he wrote the *Ode*, and their evidence has some relevance to the interpretation of the poem. All the same, Dr. Leavis is right in insisting that first and foremost what matters is what the *Ode* says and not our preconceived notions of what Keats must have meant. And his summing up has the great virtue of concentrating attention on the way in which the imaginary world of the Urn is constructed and, most particularly, on how Keats treats the element of time.

The *Ode* tells us about a world in which only one element of normal experience has been abstracted: the passage of time. "All the visible and invisible drama of human life can thus be seen, or imagined," says Mr. Murry, "under the aspect of

eternity, *sub specie aeternitatis*". But the arrest of time at one point is not eternity, or even a necessary picture of Eternity as a mode of Existence, as Mr. Murry would have us believe. It is rather Bridge's "unchanging expression of perfection", that which belongs to "the supremacy of ideal art over Nature":

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,

And it shares with eternity one characteristic and one only:

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

As doth eternity. If the silent form were indeed a symbol of eternity this very limited comparison would be out of place. As it is, the Urn is shown to be above time because it is a work of art, eternal in its silent appeal. Aesthetic experience is properly "timeless", and aesthetic values are not arrived at by reasoning. Keats relates the Urn to "quietness" and "silence" as well as to "eternity." The work of art is born in the silent communion of the artist with nature. We know how essential Keats considered "indolence"—that passive waiting for the creative impulse from which poetry would come of itself as leaves grow on a tree.

In one respect, then, art defeats time and is eternal. But it also partly belongs to time, it is a "foster-child". For the timeless work of art belongs, as a material object, to the world we live in. As an existing object the Urn is only relatively durable; it is "still unravish'd." Other generations will find in it the intangible beauty proper to art, but Keats does not tell us what will happen to the Urn's message when the Urn has gone. Presumably some other "friend to man" will still be found to give it. All mere Aestheticism, asserting the supremacy of ideal art over nature, tries to ignore the dependence of aesthetic experience upon a material source as something rather vulgar and unworthy of the attention of refined spirits dealing in higher things. Yet it remains a brute fact that the aesthete's enjoyment of beauty depends upon a work of art, the existence of a human being who must engage in other activities besides the contemplation of beauty, and the course of time that brings the work and the man together. If "Beauty is Truth" means "Truth is Art" then, as Dr. Leavis insists, the true and the real of experience are restricted very drastically.

Keats was well aware that art was not the only thing in the world. But in the *Ode* he expressed another objection to the aesthetic attitude—and one that arose from within the aesthetic

perience itself. The perfection that art creates outside time is bold and less than the spirit craves for. The marble world of the Urn exacted a price for its gift of eternity to its inhabitants:

Bold Lover, never, never, canst thou kiss
Though winning near the goal—

And, though in this stanza Keats advises the lover not to grieve, he feels it necessary to bring in time covertly in the next one; when "never, never," is cancelled by "happy, happy" and frustrated love turned into consummation:

For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting and forever young.

Static, timeless perfection has been turned into a paradise of never-ending dynamic activity where even the unheard melodies are always changing. This dropping of a bargain with life and time (to use Dr. Leavis's phrase) is quite unpardonable, of course, and fully deserves to be called a day-dream. Yet the inconsistency may be put down to an irrepressible bent to think in terms of life rather than to an unscrupulous desire to avoid reality.

Although time makes war on beauty, Keats cannot think of beauty apart from the world of time. At times he certainly used the freedom of imagination to create a dream-world which was a replica of earth with all the "disagreeables" removed. Thus, the poem on *Fancy* treats the imagination as a veritable Aladdin's lamp to bring us all we want. It is impossible to spiritualize its meaning, as Mr. Murry has tried to do, by saying that fancy means freedom from "our dreams of a mortal happiness," since fancy is entirely taken up with such dreams. Nor can "Pleasure never is at home" signify that "true Pleasure" is not to be found "in the sensual and animal man", when it nearly means that life gives us jam yesterday, jam to-morrow, but never jam to-day. Fancy can give us all the jam we desire. Unfortunately, it is only imaginary jam and not the real thing:

Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well as
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.

Yet, if Keats could sometimes wallow in that "poetical luxury" which he said Milton had renounced, he saw it as a weakness. Poetry was not just for "ease and pleasure". The imagination which could be merely an unreal substitute for life could also be a reality which made life seem unreal. The *Ode to a Nightingale*, which says so decisively that fancy cheats,

ends on the unanswered question of whether fancy or mundane existence is the dream-world. It seems almost certain that Keats wished to establish the Poet and the Dreamer as "sheer opposites" because he knew that too often they could be one and the same. He knew how, from the common-sense viewpoint, the world of imagination appears altogether a dream-world. As the poet of *Sleep and Poetry* he had recorded how, in the wake of the poetic vision,

A sense of real things comes doubly strong
And, like a muddy stream, would bear along
My soul to nothingness.

But he could not admit the nothingness of his soul any more than he could shut out the presence of "real things". Thus we can see why he could finally say with complete truthfulness that *the best kind of poetry* was all he cared for and lived for. The distinction between poetry and the *best poetry* meant all the difference between dream and reality. For, in the same way as he could not doubt his senses, he could not doubt his apprehension of beauty by the operation 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.

Fancy immersed in poetical luxury might be merely an escape from reality. Fancy perceiving the principle of beauty in things was the gateway to reality. The sleep of poetic inspiration led to no idle dream but to an awakening to truth.

It was this truth penetrating to reality that Keats linked with the principle of beauty as Eternal Being. He had not the opportunity which he desired to work out his philosophy before Time the Enemy overtook him. Yet we can hardly think that further study would have made him a Platonist. His notion of Eternal Being has little relation to the doctrine revealed to Socrates by the prophetess Diotima of a beauty—

. . . eternal, unproduced, indestructible, neither subject to increase nor decay. . . simple, pure, uncontaminated with the intermixture of human flesh and colours, and all other idle and unreal shapes attendant on mortality; the divine, the original, the supreme monoeidic beauty.

Keats loved too well the "idle and unreal shapes attendant on mortality" readily to separate them from the principle of beauty. The Keats who could do so would not be the author of the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

Plato taught what Keats discovered for himself, that love was creative of beauty. Love was personified by Plato as half-divine, half-human, the child of Poverty and Plenty. At the last, the divine would supersede the human as the lover of beauty rose above the transient to the eternal, for love was "the desire in men that good should be ever present to them." It is clearly this ever-present good that Keats has pictured in the *Ode*. The Urn is a token of eternity. But it is only a token. The silent form and the unheard melodies have to be supplemented by images that look towards the sights and sounds of earth. Not love alone but all our passion are creative of beauty for Keats, and our passions are not transformed when they are taken up into the Urn—

All breathing human passion far above,

They are simply lifted bodily into the realm of beauty and bring the warm breath of life into that cold world.

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty". Before the mystery of our existence Keats held on to two incompatible notions: the reality of time and the reality of a perfect beauty that abolished time. We do him an injustice if we imagine that he banished the tension by some inexplicable flight into the mists of metaphysics on the wings of the poetical imagination, or that he ignored the tension by retreating into the easy dream-fantasy of Aestheticism. Undoubtedly it was the world of art that revealed to him the principle of beauty. Undoubtedly, too, it was the creative imagination that made him conceive of a reality transcending the world of time. But, though the message of the Urn is an expression of Keat's personal faith, that faith is not established by the evidence forthcoming in the *Ode*. Rather, we see there a man in love with life and convinced that somehow what seems supremely good in transient nature will be preserved in an eternal reality. The ideality of art is not enough to do this, because art is static; life is more than art precisely because of its dynamic dimension, which art must exclude with consequent loss of what is good. And yet it is only through the contemplation of ideal beauty (beauty abstracted from life) that mankind gets a glimpse of what eternity is like. Cold beauty does not satisfy. Warm beauty cannot endure. So the tension is unresolved.

The *Ode* is the monument of a brave effort to hide Time's best jewel—beauty—from Time's chest—the consuming years. The effort failed, because Keats could not help acknowledging

that beauty belonged to Time the Enemy as well as to eternity. But the monument endures and can still convey to us the poet's faith. The Urn remains to speak to the sons of time in our own generation a message that points beyond the temporal to the world of values that do not age.

NEVER WITH SUCH SPLENDID MUSIC

By ISOBEL McFADDEN

They do not know that they are young.
 They feel quite old—
 Poised and brisk,
 Boarding the trams and the puffing busses
 To a first job or an embryo career—
 Or walking under the leaves to lectures,
 Nonchalant and colourful,
 Among the grey buildings in the October suns.
 They feel quite old,
 With Scouts and Guides and family errands
 Leagues behind them in another era;
 With maturity
 Pressing a thin line above their eyes.

Not on any tomorrow will they feel so sure,
 Nor yet so frightened;
 So able to measure
 And put the sheep and the goats
 Into their proper pastures.
 Never again will the presumption be so wholly forgiven them.
 They do not look at the men and women about them,
 Nor listen to voices nor any sounds.
 Yet they will remember the faces and inflections
 When the books are shabby
 And the jobs done.
 Recall them as indelible backdrops of vision
 And find in remembering their solace or distress.
 They will taste richer moments
 And truer visions may startle them.
 But never with such splendid music!

Put forth no hand
 To halt the running of their joy
 Under the glad leaves
 In the October sun.