

On “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” has been subject to several interpretations since it first appeared. The endless swirl of polemics, stemming chiefly from the “mystery” of the last lines, began with T. S. Eliot’s infamous statement (“this line strikes me as a serious blemish on a beautiful poem”¹) and proceeded with the consecutive commentaries of several critics devoted to the New Criticism² or the French “explication de texte.”³ Finally, Helen Vendler⁴ published a collection of essays on the Odes which was the first to consider the poem as being itself a possible interpretation of an aesthetic experience.⁵

¹ T. S. Eliot, “Dante” in G. S. Fraser, ed., *Keats: Odes* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 128.

² Such as Cleanth Brooks and Kenneth Burke: Cleanth Brooks, “Keats’ Sylvan Historian” in *The Well-Wrought Urn* (Brace: Dennis Dobson and Hardcourt, 1944); Kenneth Burke, “Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats” in G. S. Fraser.

³ Leo Spitzer, “Ode on a Grecian Urn, or Content vs. Metagrammar” in *Essays on English and American Literature* (Princeton: N. J., 1962).

⁴ Helen Vendler, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

⁵ Helen Vendler interprets the *Ode* as consecutive propositions of three hypotheses about aesthetic experience. The first is historical or mythological aiming at other people (first stanza), while the second is allegorical, archetypal and ideal aiming at our human aspirations (second and third stanza). Both of them are rejected in the fourth stanza where the urn “is most truly described as a self-contained, anonymous world, complete in itself, which asks from us an empathic identification supremely free both of factual inquiry and of self interest,” although it contains no answer to the major questions of origin and end. All through the poem, however, the main question arises from the “dilemma of the subject matter and the medium, of *men* and *marble*,” that is to say from the coexistence of “the sensory participation in the represented scene and the intellectual awareness of the medium.” (This latter one always disturbs the

This paper is meant to be a response to the challenges mentioned above and by the combination of strict close-reading with a hermeneutic approach will hopefully offer some new insights into the Ode.

SPECTATOR AND ARTIST: THE TWOFOLD SITUATION OF THE SPEAKER

Accepting that this poem by Keats is “a possible interpretation of an aesthetic experience” requires an account of the initial situation of the speaker who, by being spectator and artist at the same time, combines two apparently contradictory intentions: interpretation, which is a penetration inside a work of art, and creation, which is the expression of something “from inside.” It will be argued that these two activities interchange in the poem, and how the intent of interpretation turns necessarily into creation.

If we consider Leo Spitzer’s argument that the Ode, by being *The Ode on – and not to – a Grecian Urn* implies a commentary,⁶ we may assert that the initial situation of the speaker is that of a spectator. But the effect of being a “commentary,” which suggests a certain distance between the speaker and his subject, immediately disappears when the speaker addresses and anthropomorphises the urn. Thus, while the title expresses a “pre-poetic” state in which the speaker intends to write on an imaginary artefact (in the third person singular), the first line, with the appearance of the urn called into being, indicates a more intimate relationship with the object (*thou*). This personification seems to be the first step of both the process of the interpretation, which ultimately aims – without ever reaching it – at a self-identification with the object (that it becomes *I*)⁷ and the poetic intention of expression, which requires that the object be a part of the subject (*I* again). We must, however, differentiate the “concrete” object that the speaker pretends to see from the questions (not rhetorical but real

sensory participation.) The final statement of the urn is then “the paradoxical union of stimuli to sensation and thought alike.” But we must realise “that it makes an announcement from the special perspective of its own being [...] from its own eternity at once so liberating and so limited.” It is finally a “self-elucidating speech,” since the urn “is only a *silent form* when the wrong kinds of truth are asked of it.” The urn “speaks the only language that Keats can invent which he believes adequate to an eternal being [...] the bare prepositional form and the diction of Platonic abstraction.”

⁶ Spitzer p. 84.

⁷ “There is in principle no radical separation between the work of art and the person who experiences it.” See Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 28.

questions) accompanied by the vivid visions that this object inspires him to articulate. From that difference we can distinguish poetry from perception in one context and, in another one, poetry from sculpture and "active" interpretation from "passive" visual experience.⁸ What do we know about the urn itself? Almost nothing. It is a *shape*, the juxtaposition of human but not humane empty forms, a static *brede* made of *marble*.⁹ What makes it a work of art is "the *invocation* of a potentially whole and holy order of things" and "the experience of the beautiful."¹⁰ The consideration that invocation requires perception and experience requires interpretation (in addition to the fact that even the existence of the urn results from the speaker's imagination) means at the same time that the urn would remain a dead shape without the vivid scenes of the world "behind" it, without the visions of the poet, that is to say, without poetry.

In *Phaedrus* Plato suggests that "it is by virtue of the beautiful that we are able to acquire a lasting remembrance of the true world."¹¹ With regard to Plato's influence being implicit in the poem, we may ask how the speaker – wearing the mask of an interpreter – intends to grasp the true world (the *truth*), the transcendence of the work of art – already evoked by the word *urn* connoting both art and death.

The completed form never exists as a concrete aspect of the work. (...) It is constituted in the mind of the interpreter as the work discloses itself in response to his questioning. But this dialogue between work and interpreter is endless. The hermeneutic understanding is always, by its very nature, lagging behind: to understand something is to realise that one has always known it, but, at the same time, to face the mystery of his hidden knowledge.¹²

⁸ "This is the paradox of interpretation, that the subject matter is the same and each interpretation different" See R. E. Palmer, "Gadamer's Dialectical Hermeneutics" in *Hermeneutics* (Northwestern University Press, 1969), p. 211.

⁹ Cf. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful* p. 26: "Kant has a remarkable doctrine. He defended the view that in painting, form is the vehicle of beauty. Colour, on the other hand, is supposed to be simply a stimulus, a matter of sensuous affection that remains subjective and thus nothing to do with its genuine artistic or aesthetic formation."

¹⁰ Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful* (italics mine) p. 32.

¹¹ Gadamer's terming, in *The Relevance of the Beautiful* p. 15.

¹² Paul de Man, "Form and Intent in the American New Criticism" in *Blindness and Insight* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 32.

However strange it may seem, the Ode, by being “in the words of Théophile Gautier ‘une transposition d’art,’”¹³ an attempt to express a visual work of art through the medium of language or in this case through a sequence of interrogations, shows a surprising similarity with the “dialectical hermeneutics” of Gadamer described in *Truth and Method*.¹⁴ If we face the fact that Keats, in a letter written to Benjamin Baily in 1817 (two years before the composition of the *Ode*), had already declared:

I am certain of nothing but 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 –,¹⁵

we will not try to overanalyse the “meaning” of the urn’s utterance¹⁶ (it seems like a romantic aphorism with a self-evident meaning, or – with reference to Paul de Man’s assumption – the realisation of something that the speaker has always known and, at the same time, the acknowledgement of the mystery of his hidden knowledge), but rather explain why this statement is the only possible ending of the poem both syntactically and semantically. First of all, accepting Gadamer’s view “that the work of art [both the imaginary urn and the poem itself] speaks to us as a work and not as a bearer of a message,”¹⁷ we can surmise that the “essence” of both the urn and the poem cannot be found in the last lines but in the process of questioning, in the speaker’s struggle, inspired by the imaginary urn, for its understanding. Thus the aim is not necessarily the grasping of the transcendent world of the urn, but the process of the struggle itself, which, besides being valuable in itself will, however, reach transcendency – not by attaining its initial goal: the complete self-identification with the object – but by becoming itself a work of art: a poem. Before going into the details of this struggle led by the poet-interpreter, I would like to amplify the problem of the

¹³ Spitzer p. 72.

¹⁴ The task of hermeneutics is “to bring the text out of the alienation in which it finds himself back into the living present of dialogue, whose primordial fulfilment is question and answer.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, quoted by Palmer p. 200.

¹⁵ M Buxton, ed., *The Letters of John Keats* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 67.

¹⁶ As did Burke who, by asserting that the statement of the urn has the function to solve the original contradiction between science and art, neglected the difference between reality and truth and did not take into consideration either Plato’s philosophy or the fact that the close relation between beauty and truth was almost a common place in the 19th century. (Probably that is why T. S. Eliot considered it “a serious blemish on a beautiful poem.”)

¹⁷ Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful* p. 33.

relationship between the urn and the speaker with a brief reflection on the "Apollonian" and "Dionysian" elements of the text.

DREAM AND ECSTASY

As several critics¹⁸ have pointed out alluding to *The Birth of Tragedy* by Nietzsche, one can find Dionysian and Apollonian elements in the ode. Disagreeing with those who tried to prove that the first three stanzas are the objectivation of Dionysiac art while the fourth stanza describes a typically Apollonian scene, I would suggest that the alternation of the Apollonian and Dionysiac elements does not result from the succession of the scenes but from the fact that the "subjective" fantasies of the speaker are framed by the "objective" static shape of the urn.¹⁹

Apart from the attributes quoted below, Nietzsche characterises Apollonian art by closeness, immobility, rigidity and moderation, and compares Apollonian consciousness to a thin veil hiding the Dionysiac world.²⁰ It is almost obvious then, that it is the Attic Shape that corresponds to the Apollonian and not the scene described in the fourth stanza as Spitzer and Bowra assumed. The fact that those parts of the first three stanzas which describe ecstatic, wild scenes accompanied by music and never ending desire are Dionysiac is beyond doubt. But in order to prove that the fourth stanza belongs also to the Dionysiac realm, we will see first what Nietzsche says

¹⁸ M. Bowra "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in *The Romantic Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 1961), and Spitzer among others.

¹⁹ Patrick Bridgwater, *Nietzsche in Anglo-Saxony* (Leicester University Press, 1972), p. 23: "contrasting Homer, 'the aged dreamer sunk in himself, the type of the Apollonian naive artist' with Archilochus, 'the subjectively willing and desiring man [the Dionysiac genius]' Nietzsche remarks that 'here the objective artist is confronted by the first subjective artist.'" Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, transl. Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 16-17: "Apollo, the deity of all plastic forces [...], the deity of light, also holds sway over the beautiful illusion of the inner fantasy world. [...] But the dream image [...] needs that restraining boundary, that freedom from wilder impulses, that sagacious calm of the sculptor god. [...] [Apollo is] the glorious divine image of the principium individuationis, from whose gestures and looks all the delight, wisdom and beauty of 'illusion' speak to us." [The Dionysiac:] „the blissful ecstasy which, prompted by the fragmentation of the principium individuationis, rises up from man's innermost core, indeed from nature. [...] Under the influence of the narcotic potion [Nietzsche uses the analogy of intoxication] hymned by all primitive men and peoples, or in the powerful approach of the spring, joyfully penetrating the whole of the nature, those Dionysiac urges are awakened, and as they grow more intense, subjectivity becomes a complete forgetting of the self."

²⁰ Nietzsche, pp. 17-27.

about the Dionysiac art and then analyse – now only from this approach – the scene in question.

Those Dionysiac urges are awakened, and as they grow more intense, subjectivity becomes a complete forgetting of the self. [...] Not only is the bond between man and man sealed by the Dionysiac magic: alienated, hostile or subjugated nature, too, celebrates her reconciliation with her lost son, man. [...] Singing and dancing, man expresses himself as a member of higher community: he has forgotten how to walk and talk, and is about to fly dancing into the heavens. His gesture express enchantment. [...] In the Dionysiac dithyramb, man's symbolic faculties are roused to their supreme intensity: a feeling never before experienced is struggling for expression – the destruction of the veil of Maya ...²¹

“The imagery of the pious sacrifice [...] suggests a bond of communication between the levels.” – asserts Burke.²²

Although I would rather say that the leap (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the word) to transcendency remains a mere attempt, a desire (the whole scene takes place on the ground, the “heifer” is just “lowing *at* the skies,” the mystery of the “priest” is unrevealed), it is true that the “whole population takes part in the ritual”²³ and the scene emphasises not individual but communal life. The “altar” is “green,” and the “little town,” wherever it is, is related to nature. Instead of the Apollonian unity and individuality we find the plurality of “skies,” the community of the “folk” and the undetermined scenery. The scene is naturalistic (“heifer loving”) instead of being *artificial* and even has a baroquish atmosphere evoked by the “silken flanks with garlands drest” and the oxymoron: “peaceful citadel.” Only the frame, the “little town” suggests the harmony of a gentle world. In addition to all these, speech is excluded from this scene as well as from the others (only animal lowing can be heard here) and “silken flanks” can even refer to the “lower sense” of touch.

The possibility of making a distinction between the urn itself (together with the pictures that it depicts) representing the Apollonian part and the vivid visions of the narrator representing the Dionysian part also means that the beholding and desiring subject must be regarded separately from the visual object. On the other hand, placing the problem in the context of Heidegger, we may even say, that the ode is the

²¹ Nietzsche, pp. 17, 18, 21.

²² Burke, p. 115.

²³ Brooks, p. 131.

representation *par excellence* of the "aesthetic tension" between "earth" (represented by the urn as a pure object) and "world" (represented by the speaker).²⁴

To make a brief summary of all that has been said, we can conclude that the poem seems to be the expression of a process of interpretation and so raises the problem of the subject-object relationship. Furthermore, the fact that the object is a visual artefact whereas the subject necessarily uses the medium of language, adds a new dimension to the initial problem.

"THIS OBSCURE OBJECT OF DESIRE"

Concentrating on the speaker's interpretation of the urn (and regardless of its representation as a pure object, an "Attic *shape*"), a conspicuous parallelism will be seen between the anthropomorphised work of art (the first three lines), the subject of the scenes animated by the speaker's imagination, the subject matter of the poem (as it was defined above) and the reader's approach to the poetic text, which comes down to their sharing the theme of struggle for an unreachable goal.

1. The first three lines represent the urn as the "*unravished* bride of quietness," the "*foster-child* of silence and slow time," and a "*sylvan* historian." "Unravished" and "bride" invoke innocence and purity as well as the still unsatisfied desire of "quietness," "foster-child" reflects the ambiguity of her nature being different from silence and slow time, and "sylvan" connoting the natural, the unconscious, the mysterious and the unknown seems to be in contrast with "historian." Thus, despite the ostensible harmony, the initial lines contain an inherent tension which derives from her being "not entirely the same as..." and, as a result, are the mirror image of the tension between the subject and the object. (Anyway, only a functional – not artistic – object could be merely silent, quiet or the witness of history.)

2. The represented forms of the scenes show attitudes of pursuit and flight (of desire accompanied necessarily by the above mentioned tension), of music-making, and of sacrifice aiming at – or desiring – the initiation to transcendency.

²⁴ The building up of "earth" and the exhibition of "world" are the two basic tendencies of a work of art. The *aesthetic tension* is described in terms of the intrinsic tension between "earth", as the creative ground of things, and "world" [...]. The work of art, as a happening in which truth comes to unconcealment, represents a capturing of this creative tension in a form. Thus it brings into the realm of being as a whole and holds open to man the inner struggle between earth and world. [...] "Beauty is a way that truth as unconcealment happens." M. Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, 1935, quoted by Palmer, p. 159.

3. The poem itself represents the speaker's struggle for the complete understanding and the expression of a work of art which is, moreover, personified as female (*bride*). Since this understanding is as impossible as the possession of the maidens or the leap to transcendency, we can surmise that the pictures on the urn are not just typical Greek scenes representing typically ideal states of being (in the Platonic sense of the word), but they are also the symbols of the interpretation itself.

4. However, while we, the readers of the poem try to approach a poetic text with the help of everyday language, the speaker uses the medium of poetic language to approach a visual work of art. This "poetic intention" raises both the question whether the expression of a visual, timeless work of art (timeless in its abstract and concrete sense) is possible by the "temporal art" of language and whether the distance between spectacle and spectator can ever be destroyed by language. But we must not forget that there is a difference between the language of poetry and that of prose.²⁵ While discursive prose is referential, rational, linear and reflects the concept of time by its very nature (each verb has a temporal aspect), poetic language can be closer to visual and musical arts. In the following, we will see through the close reading of the poem how the speaker approaches the visual and the musical, and why the "poetic" text ends with a "cold" philosophical sentence (both in the moral and the grammatical sense of the word). Thus, from now on, we will concentrate on the question of poetic language and on its mediatory function between the conscious mind and a visual artefact.

...romantic thought and romantic poetry seem to come so close to giving in completely to the nostalgia for the object that it becomes difficult to distinguish between object and image, between imagination and perception, between an expressive or constitutive and a mimetic or literal language. [...] ...critics who speak of a 'happy relationship' between matter and consciousness fail to realise that the very fact that the relationship has to be

²⁵ Cf. Paul de Man, "Lyric and Modernity" in *Blindness and Insight* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 168: "In eighteenth century speculations about the origins of language, the assertion that the archaic language is that of poetry, the contemporary or modern language that of prose is a commonplace. Vico, Rousseau, and Herder, to mention only the most famous names, all assert the priority of poetry over prose, often with a value-emphasis that seems to interpret the loss of spontaneity as a decline [...]. Be this as it may, it remains that regardless of value judgements, the definition of poetry as the first language gives it an archaic, ancient quality that is the opposite of modern, whereas the deliberate, cold and rational character of discursive prose, which can only imitate or represent the original impulse if it does not ignore it altogether, would be the true language of modernity. The same assumption appears during the eighteenth century, with 'music' substituting for 'poetry' and opposed to language or literature as an equivalent of prose."

established within the medium of language indicates that it does not exist in actuality.²⁶

TIME, MUSIC AND STRUCTURE

Accepting that timelessness is one of the most dominant features of both the world that the urn invokes and of visual art itself, we will examine how the poetic language approaches this timelessness and how the structure of the poem reveals at the same time the temporal nature of both the process of interpretation and the poetic discourse. We will see also, that the alternation of timelessness and temporality, and the sudden changes of tone correspond to that "game" of engagement-disengagement which is so characteristic of the critical attitude.²⁷

Despite the inherent tension, which anticipates not only the theme of desire, but also the opposition between mobility-immobility ("quietness"), audible-inaudible ("silence"), time-timelessness ("slow time"), the first three lines of the ode invoke harmony and represent a contrast to mortality. Since time is implicitly present in the succession of "bride," "child" and "historian" (connoting old age) which, by meeting in the urn (connoting death) imply the suppression of human life-time.

In the next lines, by a sudden change of tone, the quietness turns into struggle (invoking both the possibility of death and conception, so both the end and the beginning of life), ecstasy, violence and madness, the "bride" into "maidens loth," the silence into music, and, on the syntactical and morphological level, the singular turns into plural and the positive description into perplexed questions. Although immobility is replaced by movements, the absence of verbs (the temporal aspect of language) remains a remarkable feature of the propositions.

The second stanza, carrying on the theme of music, starts with the sudden interruption of the philosophical mind disturbing the stream of the overwhelming visions, that never permits the definitive surrender of the subject to the object. The next three lines anticipate "dost tease us out of thought" by asking the pipes to "play on" and therefore resuming the broken exaltation. The questions followed by a statement change into exclamations and the excitement is rendered even more perceptible by the language structures which render the swirl of the propositions comparable to the incantation of initiation ceremonies (anticipating the second scene).

²⁶ Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 7.

²⁷ Helen Venedler (*The Odes of John Keats* p. 126) uses the expression "engagement -disengagement" in a slightly different sense than I do here.

The vocabulary is very simple, but through the repetition of central words, sounds and syntactic patterns accompanied by an always intensifying rhythm, the description reaches an almost ecstatic level. Thus, the theme of music (*the non-referentiality*²⁸ where the high pitched sound of the pipe is in harmonious accord with the low pitched sound of the timbrels) is accompanied by the musicality of the language, which stands in opposition with referential everyday language (“parching tongue”), based on the concepts of time, space and oppositions. It is not surprising then, that human speech is excluded from the ideal world and is replaced by music or by animal howling. The only verb alluding to speech is negated (“nor ever bid”) and the non-uttered word is a loan-word (“adieu”). After examining how poetry approaches the non-referentiality of transcendency, let us see what the means are by which it invokes timelessness.

As verbs reflect the temporal aspect of language, verblessness, which is not only a characteristic of the first stanza but of the following stanzas as well, can be a means to bring the language closer to the timeless nature of the urn. In the majority of cases verbs are replaced by present participles emphasising the never-beginning and never-ending nature of the actions. Even if a verb appears in the description of the scenes, it is either a negated modal verb – stressing on the one hand the *non-referential* nature of the “ideal” word (in the second stanza) as opposed to “reality” where verbs (the concept of time) do have sense, and on the other the impossibility (“cannot,” “canst not,” “never can” “nor ever can” etc.) of all that is possible in the temporal world –, or it describes a state instead of an action or a positive – not negated – experience (“are,” “is”). (For time being the quotient of movement and space, if one of them – in this case movement – is missing, time becomes undefinable.) The three exceptions to the rule are as follows: 1. “*play on*” (it does not require any comment) 2. “*Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone*” (it can be explained by the facts that the word pipe is repeated four times in three stanzas, that the only verb form in which it appears is this imperative, that it always designates perpetuity – once made explicit by “for ever” – and that it is almost an onomatopoeia increasing the musical effect of the description – music being *the non-referential* and *the ideal art* –); 3. “*lead’s!*” (it can well be due to the context giving to it some special connotations, such as initiation or elevation to

²⁸ To solve the paradox that sculpture is a referential art but the ideal that language tries to approach is non-referential, we must take again into consideration that the object is not beautiful in itself but becomes beautiful in the eyes of the beholder, because it has the capacity to *invoke* the beautiful. This is what Bowra (p. 141) calls the “indefinable ‘other.’” It means that although a visual artefact can well be referential, the urn evokes a world beyond all references. Instead of imitating or depicting a real referent, it is as schematic as an icon made to represent not “reality” but “truth.”

transcendancy). Thus the only verb standing in opposition with the previous ones is "leaves," which is neither modal, nor negated and invokes the past as well as the concept of movement.

The sudden reminiscence of reality (last lines of the 3rd stanza) at the end of the first scene representing an eternal "before the orgy" state where the predominant senses are sight and hearing (not requiring an immediate relationship with the object) shows man "after the orgy" with the sense of taste and an immediate pain in his head. As a result, the prevailing verblessness with its suspension at the end of the scene reflect the contrast between the object (timeless) and the beholding subject (temporal).

Regarding the atemporal aspect of visionary language resulting from the absence of verbs, we can thus conclude that the description of the scenes seems to be in contrast with the rest of the poem. But the rest, however, may well be as non-referential as the visions intend to be, since each verb is used in the future tense. It is the future tense, by the way, that makes each proposition at the same time universally and eternally true (as opposed to actually real) and non-referential. The last stanza of the poem expresses this nostalgia for timelessness the most acutely, by stressing the temporal nature of human life. Each word of the line "When old age shall this generation waste" stands in opposition with the visions and the urn itself.

However, we will see later that despite verblessness and musicality which permit the invocation of the ideal world, the speaker is not able to detach himself from reality, as language cannot be non-referential.

In the second scene (4th stanza), the previous description is altered by questions, the speaker approaches the urn again and, by carrying on verblessness and by giving proof of the impossibility to choose between opposite things (the scenery is either a mountain or a river or a seashore – the earthly extremes of the vertical axe), emphasises the contrast between reality and the scene depicted on the urn. (The details and the "meaning" of this interrogative description have been already analysed.) But the visions are unexpectedly disturbed by the sudden intervention of the conscious mind (and of the future tense).

Thus, through a kind of demystification, the speaker (and the reader) realises that there is no way back to the past (the "little town" is suddenly taken for real and not for imaginary), it remains silent for ever. The renunciation of further questions also means a capitulation to mystery. The fifth stanza reflects this distance, as if the speaker had been teased out not of thoughts but of the ecstatic state which reflected the fallacy

that the spectator could ever become one with the object.²⁹ The climax of this identification was reached in fact at the very moment when the imaginary was taken for real, but, by a sudden transition, it led immediately to its extreme opposite: the definitive detachment of the subject from the object.

The eternal present of the scenes turns into actual present and, as in an “eternal recurrence,” the speaker addresses the urn again. This time, however, he does not anthropomorphise it into bride, child or historian: the urn is simply (as it was in that pre-poetic state) an Attic shape with “brede of marble men.” Although the speaker resumes the initial orgiastic scene, it seems, since his point of view is in the actual present and he considers his visions as the past, that the scene has somewhat changed its character. Apart from being completely inert without the vivid visions of the speaker (besides the already mentioned “brede / Of marble...,” the sublime “happy boughs” became realistic “forest branches”), the “trodden weed” and the word “*overwrought*” invoke a development in time as well which is in contrast with the original timelessness. These lines reflect then that even if the work of art is eternal, the process of interpretation is necessarily related to the concept of time. As for the urn itself, it seems that by the end of the poem it has regained its definitive closeness and plasticity.

As a result, the last lines hold a paradox on the contextual level.³⁰ Whereas they are preceded by a conscious state of mind – the subject is detached from the object –, which is similar to the pre-poetic state of the title (but only like two points above each other on a spiral) and add to the effect of circularity corresponding to the shape of the urn, the urn itself suddenly speaks, takes the “right to speak” from the speaker, and therefore (by going beyond the simple personification which required a beholding subject) becomes similar to the autonomous subject. Thus, instead of remaining a personified object being part of the speaker’s imagination, it obtains the status of a real person. Although this paradox could be easily soived if we considered it as the end of a process of interpretation, when the interpreter finally grasps the “message” of the object, it will be argued that the solution, if there is any, is not as simple as that.

Before going into any further analysis of the last lines we can conclude from the structure of the ode, implying the above mentioned game of engagement-disengagement, that the speaker, while trying to destroy temporality through the poetic

²⁹ Nietzsche, p. 18 about the Dionysiac magic: “Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: the artistic power of the whole of nature reveals itself to the supreme gratification of the primal Oneness amidst the paroxysms of intoxication.”

³⁰ For the other paradoxes either in the whole poem or only in these lines, see Brooks.

language, remains aware of the impossibility of destroying the temporal nature of either the process of interpretation or the poetic discourse.

"WHO CANST THUS EXPRESS
A FLOWERY TALE MORE SWEETLY THAN OUR RHYME"

To examine the final statement, we should first give an account of another, maybe unintentional means of expressing non-referentiality, and then consider how the poem reflects – intentionally – the referential nature of language, and how “dialectical hermeneutics” tries to approach the essence of the work of art.

The above quoted proposition reveals (besides its self-evident “meaning”) an interesting feature of the vocabulary of the ode, which is the recurrence of the word “sweet.” The frequent use of this word may seem strange, as in spite of the fact that it refers to the lower sense of taste, it designates a quality that by the comparison becomes *the* supreme quality, necessarily “truth.” Since it reappears in the second stanza in connection with music, we can inquire what could inspire this choice. The reader can hardly answer the question unless the word alludes to another text. As it well-known, Keats’ diction is full of Shakespearean reminiscences; an antecedent of this use of “sweet” may probably be found in Sonnet 54:

O how much more doth beauty beauteous seem
By that sweet ornament which truth doth give!

Accepting Helen Vendler’s assumption that “Sweetness and beauty are two of Shakespeare’s constituting categories of value, standing respectively for inward virtue and outward show,”³¹ we may propose that “sweet” in the Ode has that Shakespearean connotation. If we accept that intertextuality increases the effect of “irreality,” the above observation will not seem a mere *acte gratuit*.

As for the grammatical features of the proposition, in vain does it seem to be a positive statement (about the urn), it reflects the incapability (of the speaker) to express what these tales are actually like. He cannot do anything but compare it to the “rhymes” (sculpture versus poetry) and stress the superiority of the urn by alluding to poetry which this work of art is *not*.

³¹ Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 98.

Gradation and negation, being the predominant features of the language of the ode, reflect then the difficulty to express what the urn (the symbol of transcendent art) actually *is*, without referring to the human world. This problem rises in the second and the third stanzas as well, which describe the “ideal” word by negating the “real” one, as if the previous one was inexpressible by language. The fact that the visions of the scenes do not contain a single statement only interrogations and verbless or negated exclamations (according to Aristotle³² the verbless structures cannot be called statement), seems to support the idea that nothing can be said positively about the world of the urn.

If we add to all that has been said the distinction made by Heidegger in *The Origin of the Work of Art* between the characteristics of a “thing” and the “thing” itself, which assumes that the essence of this latter is not identifiable from all its various characteristics, we can conclude – for in the stream of questions each interrogative is either “what” or “who” (instead of “what is it like,” “why” or “where”) –, that the ode represents a desperate struggle to grasp the “essence” of the urn through a description, which is an attempt that necessarily ends in failure.

It seems then, that the final philosophical statement does not stand for a kind of illumination rising from the aesthetic experience, but is a knowledge(!), that one can have on earth without being able to make the final leap to transcendency. It is the message of the urn – and a message can be articulated, whereas the essence seems to be inexpressible. (If we accepted that this statement represents the essence, we should also accept the superiority of abstract philosophical language over poetry and the visual arts.)

However, we must not forget that this statement is not made by the speaker but by the urn and that it closes a poem in which the speaker himself has not made any statement. If we assume that the urn (now separated from the beholder) is the transcendent art itself, we do not expect it to speak the poetic language of the gazer which intended to be a medium of transcendency, but the only language which can express the nature of the transcendency itself, the only general truth expressible by words. The poet-interpreter, never being identical with his object cannot make a statement, but the urn, being a subject identical with its object, can. The urn speaks the abstract (neither perceptible – silent –, nor referential) language of its own eternity that cannot be compared to poetry. It dwells in “another dimension.” Thus the speaking of the “silent” urn doesn’t deny the value of the process of interpretation (by suggesting

³² Arisztotelész, *Hermeneutika* (Debrecen: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1994), p. 16.

that the interpreter couldn't catch the essence), but rather represents ultimate poetry, where the object of the speaker becomes an autonomous subject.

At the same time, however, we all know that the silent shape is rendered expressive and vivid only by the speaker's imagination, which permits the dead form to become a "flowery tale," a poem. Hence, in spite of the fact that the speaker is not able to reach the ultimate goal of the interpretation, the complete self-identification with the object, he can express this struggle with the object and can also create a new work of art, which is not the mere interpretation of an already existing one. As a result, the object of interpretation turns out to be a source of inspiration, and the only means by which one can grasp the transcendency of art turns out to be creation.