Statuesque Images Stationed in the
‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’

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Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve:
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!
(‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ 17–20)

The word *statuesque*, appearing in this paper, was first used by Coleridge in his Shakespearian criticism, when he contrasted Shakespeare with the Ancients, asserting that the productions of the Greek stage were “if the expression may be allowed, *statuesque*, whilst those of the moderns are *picturesque*.” (OED) The unfamiliar word was a translation of the word “plastisch” used by German critics, and Coleridge in fact had been using the word since 1799. The meaning of the word, reminiscent of a statue in size, posture, or stillness, would be well applicable to some of the works by the Romantic poets, and especially those by Keats, and here, taking his ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ as an example, we shall examine to what extent Keats made use of statuesque images in his works.

In attempting to give the equivalent of seeing works of sculpture, the poet may describe the appearance of a statue, relief, or vase, or he may disclose the sensations, emotions, and thoughts aroused in him by the work of sculpture, or, lastly, he may strive to re-create the work of art in what may be termed imaginatively statuesque poetry. (Larrabee 8) These three processes, naturally enough, could scarcely be distinguished starkly, and are quite often intermixed.

It has been noticed that there are many traits in Keats’s poems which reveal the possibility that he imbibed no little nutrition from sculptures he actually saw or from engravings. The action of the lovers in the ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, depicted in the lines given at the beginning of this paper, is so expressed as to be arrested just before completion, and their action seems never to be completed as long as there’s a minute space kept between their lips, and thus the oxymoronic state of dynamic stasis is completed, making the lovers “[f]or ever” young. Such a static state full of dynamic energies is commonly thought as characteristic of the Grecian sculptures, and Keats’s *statuesque* expressions and other *stationed* images, as it were, must reflect his own experience of statuary, in addition to the literary influence of *Paradise Lost*.

The period of Keats’s career as poet happened to coincide with the heyday of the visual arts in Britain, and the nation’s interest in the antiquities since the 18th century hit its peak. The publication of the *Annals of the*
**Fine Arts** in 1816 (until 1820) would be counted as one of the examples indicative of this fact. Those were also the days of antiquarianism, and most famous relics of the ancient world such as the Rosetta Stone, the vases and sculptures of the Tounely Collection, the Portland Vase, the Phigalian (now called Bassae) frieze, the Elgin Marbles and the colossal bust of Ramesses II, all these were stored and exhibited at the British Museum between 1802 and 1818, and no doubt they benefited Keats's composition.

Among these, the Portland Vase, whose frieze presumably became part of the motif of the story of the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', Keats must have been familiar, apart from the original, with its reproduction at James Tassie's fashionable jewellery shop (in those days run by his nephew William) near Leicester Square. Byron and Shelley were also Tassie's customers, and Keats's favourite seal of Shakespeare was bought at Tassie's. Needless to say, this Vase and the Elgin Marbles together with the Phigalian frieze exerted undeniable influences over his works.

Almost a year after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the morning papers of June 8th 1816 printed an article on the result of the votes on the purchase of the Elgin Marbles, which had been argued for several years in Parliament. The results were 82 yees and 30 nays: by the majority of 52 the purchase of the Elgin Marbles was decided. To the disappointment of the readers, who, facing the post-war financial crisis of the country, had been sympathetic to the wide-spread phrase, "Should we not buy bread rather than stone?" spoken by Henry Brougham during the debate in Parliament and by Cruikshank in his famous cartoon, the voting results showed that they chose stone before bread. The country had an accumulated national debt of 814,335,909l. *(The Times* 24 Nov. 1815)

This decision, however, was indicative of the fact that the classical aesthetic, setting a high valuation on the ideal beauty as of the Apollo Belvedere, the Venus de Medici and others, was superseded by the Romantic aesthetic, which found a positive value in a fragmentary work of art. The Elgin Marbles can be taken to be a kind of objective correlative for the emerging aesthetic of the Romantics, that is, their predilection for the fragment. It is an aesthetic which has something to do with the spread of the theories of the picturesque and the sublime in that both theories are built on the assumption that human perceptions are partial and fragmentary, or, in other words, they recognised human nature as on the perpetual move from becoming towards being. Besides, these Marbles were the first Greek originals that had been brought to the British shores, and so they shocked, as it were, those people whose aesthetic eyes were nurtured by the Graeco-Roman forms of beauty.

Historically, since England had always been part of the Western Roman Empire, the ancient Greece and the Eastern Roman Empire, which later absorbed Greece, were totally different worlds to the English. Especially after the invasion by the Ottoman Empire into the Eastern Europe, annexing Greece in the 15th century, the ancient Greece and Hellenism became nothing but a legend to the English people. *(Bowen 168–69)* It was partly for this reason that the classical revival during the age of the Enlightenment began with the revaluation of Rome and then, about the middle of the 18th century, new light came to be shed upon Greece as the fame of republican Rome was on the wane. To put it another way, until about the middle of the century, ancient Greece was seen by the English people through the filter of ancient Rome.

It was about the year 1732 that a dining club called the Society of Dilettanti was founded by a group of noblemen. Its membership was originally confined to those who had been to Italy, but later in 1764 it was
revised to include those who had been upon some other Classic Ground. Horace Walpole, that great outsider who acted out the word of his own coinage "serendipity", tartly observed such a nominal qualification as "the real one being drunk." (14 April 1743) In any case, the motto of the Society, "Grecian taste and Roman spirit", well conveys the atmosphere of the century: 18th-century England, or the age of Enlightenment, saw the rise of people's ardour for classical culture.

In fact, not a few cognoscenti and critics of the earlier 18th century had already been familiar with Greek sculptures and urns, mainly through the literary works of Dryden, Pope, Thomson and others. Dryden's 'A Parallel between Poetry and Painting', followed by Thomson's Liberty (1734–36), appeared as early as 1695, anticipating Reynolds's ideas and arguments on the close relationship between the three sister arts to be delivered in his discourses. During the middle and latter parts of the century, works like Spence's Polymetis (1747), Winckelmann's Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture (1755, an English version, 1765), James Stuart and Nicholas Revett's Antiquities of Athens (1762–1814), and Lemprière's Classical Dictionary (1788), all contributed to the enhancement of people's ardour, and stimulated the rise of the new aesthetic.

For the most part, however, their "Greek works of art" meant in fact the Roman copies of the later age, and even such a famous connoisseur like Winckelmann did not pay much attention to the fact. For example, the objects of his study dealt with in the Reflections were mostly Graeco-Roman. Unfortunately his most important work History of the Art of the Antiquity (1764) did not circulate in England for nearly a hundred years after its publication, and an English translation was to appear first not in England but in America. In such a state of things, the Frenchman Le Roy introduced genuine Greek works of art ornamenting the Parthenon in a volume on Greek sculpture in 1758, and it was by the second volume of Stuart, who was generally known as "Athenian Stuart", posthumously published in 1787, that European people for the first time recognised the fact that there were truly marvellous and magnificent ancient ruins and sculptures in Greece.

When the excavations of the ancient ruins in Pompeii and Herculaneum began in the 1760s, Europeans became attracted firstly by Naples and its vicinity. The whole area of Naples had been inhabited by the ancient Greeks long before the Romans settled, and from their tombs were excavated various relics of the ancient Greece and Rome like urns, vases, marbles, and ornaments, to say nothing of the remains of architecture and wall paintings. Before this, many archaeologists had excavated the ruins in and about Rome, and a vase later to be known as the Portland Vase was also found in 1582 by Fabrizio Lazzaro in a mound to the south of Rome, but since the excavations in Italy of the 1760s, the tide of excavations came to be headed eastward to Greece and Asia Minor. Those young architects who wished to move into the limelight of the age went there one after another; and Charles Cockerell, grandson of Samuel Pepys, who found the Phigalan frieze in Arcadia in 1811, was one of such architects.

Towards the end of the 18th century, the British diplomatic policy, ever intent on promoting its national interest by ensuring its sea route for trade and commerce, chose to proceed midway between the two great powers, France and the Ottoman Empire, through the Mediterranean Sea to the Black Sea. This diplomacy became another important factor to advance the British interest in the east, and, in fact, as ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary to the Ottoman Porte, it was the official objective of Lord Elgin to persuade the Ottoman government to open the route to the Black Sea and to establish a British postal station at Suez.

From his younger days at Westminster School, Elgin was interested in the fine arts, especially the statuary.
One of the alumni of the School was John Dryden, whose essay mentioned before might have exerted a certain influence on Elgin. In addition, it was a custom of the day prevalent mainly among the noblemen like those of the Society of Dilettanti to collect sculptures of various kinds, and those people of rank like Elgin would naturally be interested in them. On hearing the news of some antiquities being excavated somewhere, British noblemen all went to Rome, where almost all of the relics were assembled, and they collected remarkable pieces, mainly marbles and vases, one after another as if to sweep the market. Those collected items after their return became either gorgeous ornaments in their luxurious drawing rooms and libraries or high-priced articles in the British antique market, and then circulated across the country. Thus about the turn of the century, the culture of stone, as it were, seemed to flower in Britain.

Elgin received an advice from an architect Thomas Harrison, who specialised in Greek architecture and was finishing Elgin’s country house, Broomhall, whose north front was an exact copy of the façade of the Parthenon. Harrison, on hearing Elgin’s mission at Athens and Constantinople, earnestly recommended Elgin to investigate at Athens the essence of Greek art like architecture and sculptures. This concentrated Elgin’s mind on Greek art more intentionally, and, moreover, Harrison persuaded Elgin to make plaster casts and drawings of the statuary, which would greatly contribute to the advancement of the visual arts of Britain. Indeed, statuary was, along with landscape painting, a yet undeveloped area in British visual arts as Walpole lamented in his essay *Anecdotes of Painting*. Elgin said, before the Select Committee on the Elgin Marbles in 1816, that his intentions had been to bring home casts and drawings from Athens “for the benefit and advancement of the Fine Arts in this Country” (‘Report from the Select Committee’), and we cannot wholly deny but that his work was done out of a sense of *noblesse oblige*.

Among the journals of the day, *The Times* was the earliest to let the existence of the Elgin Marbles be known to the general public (on February 26, 1803, an article on the recovery of the cargo of the Mentor which had foundered at Cerigo on the 17th of September 1802). But it was the *Examiner*, the *avant-garde* also in art, which first admitted openly the high artistry of the marbles, fragmentary as they were indeed, and recommended the government to purchase them.

....No single figure is entire, being cruelly amputated by barbarous hands, and gnawed by the tooth of time; but what have been spared are sufficient to justify the unbounded praises bestowed on them by the historians of antiquity...The introduction of these grand productions of ancient genius into England is a glorious era in the Fine Arts...The Government of England ought to purchase these marbles of their Noble Possessor, and deposit them in a receptacle worthy of their excellence, for the perpetual benefit of the Nation and its Professors of Art. (8 Oct. 1809)

The writer of this article was Robert Hunt, who, once apprenticed to an engraver, was a regular contributor of art criticism to his brother’s periodicals, and he welcomed the arrival of the Marbles wholeheartedly. On the contrary, his brother Leigh Hunt, whose early taste was formed on the familiar Graeco-Roman antiques like other gentlemen of the 18th century, in fact showed little interest in the artistry of the Elgin Marbles, but like most of the left-wing people of the day, he welcomed the revival of the classical world as it embodied an ideal spirit of freedom and equality. Besides, since he advocated social reforms in the *Examiner* laying emphasis both on politics and on culture including the fine arts and literature, it was worth his while to circulate in
society the new aesthetic embodied in the Elgin Marbles. Indeed it was an aesthetic totally different from the one accepted by the 18th-century aristocrats and Academicians. The Examiner, as a matter of course, continued to publish articles from time to time in support of the Marbles right to the end of the long arguments.

As is well known, Keats wrote ‘Sleep and Poetry’ in the library of Hunt’s cottage surrounded by the classical pictures and busts. Presumably he was so happy to share such a classical atmosphere with Hunt, who, besides the fact that Benjamin West was his great-uncle, at Christ’s Hospital, had been familiar with the classical world through Pantheon, Polymetis and Classical Dictionary, those “banned” books (Roe 42), just like Keats at Clarke’s Academy. If the lines 354–91 of ‘Sleep and Poetry’ appear merely an adopted “inventory of the art garniture of the room” (Clarke 134), Keats was soon to cultivate his own classical world in his poems by making sufficient use of his newly-obtained, first-hand knowledge of statuary through the Elgin Marbles.

Then, our interest will be directed towards how he actually came to compose his Grecian, or statuesque lines? Everyone knows how Keats behaved when he first encountered the Elgin Marbles at the British Museum. Haydon, who took Keats there, afterwards put down his own first impression of the Marbles.

The first thing I fixed my eyes on, was the wrist of a figure in one of the female groups, in which were visible, though in a feminine form, the radius and ulna. I was astonished, for I had never seen them hinted at in any female wrist in the antique. I darted my eye to the elbow, and saw the outer condyle visibly affecting the shape as in nature. I saw that the arm was in repose and the soft parts in relaxation. That combination of nature and idea which I had felt was so much wanting for high art was here displayed to mid-day conviction. My heart beat! If I had seen nothing else, I had beheld sufficient to keep me to nature for the rest of my life. (Autobiography I 84)

This “feminine form” is no doubt the Demeter of the East Pediment, and since then (he saw the Marbles at Elgin’s residence at Park Lane), Haydon placed the Elgin Marbles at the highest of the visual arts, and, soon after, felt he was obliged to make every effort to have the Marbles purchased by the state in spite of the fact that Payne Knight and his followers had been severely criticising the artistry of the Marbles on their first arrival at London.

Just like Byron, who, besides attacking Elgin’s “plunder” with vitriolic terms, passed such harsh criticism on the Marbles themselves as “rubbish”, Payne Knight exclusively denied the originality and artistry of the Marbles.

Of Phidias’s general style of composition, the friezes and metopes of the temple of Minerva at Athens, published by Mr. Stuart, and since brought to England, may afford us competent information; but as these are merely architectural sculptures executed from his designs and under his directions, probably by workmen scarcely ranked among artists, and meant to be seen at the height of more than forty feet from the eye, they can throw but little light upon the more important details of his art...From the degree and the mode of relief in the friezes they appear to have been intended to produce an effect like that of the simplest kind of monochromatic painting, when seen from their proper point of sight; which effect must have been extremely light and elegant. (Specimens sec. 74)
He in fact did not accept artistic merit in marbles in general, let alone fragmentary ones, and from the viewpoint of the 18th-century Neo-classical aesthetic he placed on top of artistry the Graeco-Roman art represented by bronze statues like those in the famous Townley Collection. His depreciation of the Elgin Marbles shown above and Haydon’s counterattack in the Examiner or the Morning Chronicle may be taken to announce the beginning not only of the long arguments for and against the purchase of the Marbles but also of the battle between the 18th- and the 19th-century aesthetics.

The Elgin Marbles left a deep and lasting impression on Keats, but he was not a connoisseur nor was he a sculptor, and he could do nothing at first but be mute before these tremendous and inimitable sculptures. Although he dedicated a sonnet to Haydon written soon after his first encounter with the Marbles and there criticised Payne Knight as a man with “browless idiomatism, o’erwise phlegm” (12), Keats said nothing definite about the Marbles themselves. Only he said that they were “mighty things” (2), as if he were the artist sitting before the huge fragments of an ancient sculpture in a picture dashed off by Fuseli generally known as ‘The Artist Moved by the Magnitude of Antique Fragments’.

Unlike Haydon’s explanatory, and almost anatomical, delineation of the Marbles, Keats did not describe what the sculptures actually looked like either in another sonnet entitled ‘On Seeing the Elgin Marbles’, although he surely had a knowledge of anatomy obtained at Guy’s Hospital. He rather expresses or interprets what effects or impressions the Marbles had on him. What matters to him is what Benjamin West called, when he studied the Elgin Marbles, the “visible signs of that internal life”. (Memorandum 54) It was none other than to interpret the internal meaning of an external form of beauty, or in other words, it was to see the external form organically united with the spirit within, which is exactly what the Grecian sculptures show, and the poet’s duty is to understand such workings of the spirit and put them into words: thus inquiries were to be made later when he faced, or imagined he was facing, beautiful figures probably on an ancient cinerary urn: “What men or gods are these? What maidens loth? / What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?”

The ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ is a refined example of Keatsian way of ‘stationing’. Keats could not say anything about the sculptures at his first encounter, but after that, as Severn would have commented, he “went again and again to see the Elgin Marbles, and would sit for an hour or more at a time beside them rapt in revery.” (Sharp 32) Keats could feel what he saw or had seen, or, he could feel his impression of a thing captured through the eye ever remaining in his physical as well as mental memory (as he once said in his letter that he could feel the roundness of a billiard ball as if he were himself rolling), and so the impression could be reproduced at any later time as concrete as concrete could be.

Then, what was he doing in front of the Marbles for hours without saying a word? I suspect he was trying to carve with his invisible chisel, as it were, his visual experience of the statues into a concrete poem, just as the ancient artist carved the object of his experience into a concrete (albeit marble) sculpture. Although the trial seemed fruitless at first, his Negative Capability did not fail to enable him soon to compose great statuesque poetry.

Let us see the figure 1. This is one of the high-reliefs from the metopes of the Elgin Marbles, depicting the battle of a Centaur and a Lapith. Here, although the right arm of the Centaur is broken off, we can imagine that he is on the point of dealing a deadly blow to the Lapith and that the next moment will see the end. Similar scenes and figures can also be found in the Phigalian frieze (fig. 2), and in both cases, the action itself is
frozen, and the figures are so stationed as to suggest that the energies contained in the action are held just before being discharged, giving the scene an intensity of its own. And, since the action is never to be completed, its energies are forever held before climax, letting the action itself become forever vivid without becoming stale. Arguably, Keats learned something like this from the Elgin Marbles and the Phigalian frieze as well, and this oxymoronic state of dynamic stasis is the same in kind as the lovers' intense action we saw at the beginning of this essay.

We know the sacrificial heifer and probably the procession itself in the ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ are images derived mostly from the Elgin Marbles, and, since Endymion was begun soon after his encounter with the Marbles, it is natural that we see quite a few statuesque images embedded here and there. The lines on the sleeping Adonis will be a good example.

And coverlids gold-tinted like the peach,
Or ripe October's faded marigolds,
Fell sleek about him in a thousand folds—
Not hiding up an Apollonian curve
Of neck and shoulder, nor the tenting swerve
Of knee from knee, nor ankles pointing light;
But rather, giving them to the filled sight
Officiously. Sideway his face repos'd
On one white arm.

(II, 396–404)

When composing these lines, Keats, as Ian Jack points out, had in his mind Poussin’s ‘Echo and Narcissus’ (Jack 157), but the hermaphroditic delineation of Adonis’s figure owes much to those attitudes of the sculptures of Aphrodite and her mother Dione besides Hestia of the East Pediment of the Parthenon (fig. 3), which Keats knew quite well. The flowing folds of the robe, looking as if translucent, suggest not only the contours of the goddesses but also their emotions, even their characters, and they are what Winckelmann admired as the finest example of the Parthenon marbles, and even Thomson in the earlier 18th century (that is, before Winckelmann) admitted the effective use of such translucent robes and other techniques as well found in the ancient Greek sculptures. His description of the “Cyprian Queen” (i.e. Aphrodite) and others in the part of ‘Greece’ in Liberty will be the evidence of his knowledge, and his lines could have been taken as a substitute for textbooks of sculpture as was quite often the case with poetry during the Age of the Enlightenment.

Jove’s awful brow, Apollo’s air divine,
The fierce atrocious frown of sinewed Mars,
Or the sly graces of the Cyprian Queen.
Minutely perfect all! Each dimple sunk,
And every muscle swelled, as nature taught.
In tresses, braided gay, the marble waved;

Fig. 3
Flowed in loose robes, or thin transparent veils;
Sprung into motion; softened into flesh;
Was fired to passion, or refined to soul.

(II 304–12)

But, of course, Keats’s statuesque images and lines, culminating in ‘The Fall of Hyperion’ were not all of them the product of his close study of the Elgin Marbles, because, as I mentioned, there were a large number of relics of the ancient world assembled and exhibited and known from printed texts which might exert certain influences over the contemporary poets and artists. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the studies of classical culture became so popular in Britain and researches were intensively made through documentary records, but it was characteristic of the age of the Enlightenment that new light was shed on classical culture mainly through the observation and classification of substantial artefacts rather than relying wholly on written sources.

Considering this cultural backdrop of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, it is natural for us to think that Keats was lucky enough and must have made sufficient use of various occasions of examining the statuary and relics of the ancient worlds aside from influences of books and poets. And here, I would like to examine briefly the ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, to see in what respect Keats was indebted to the statuary available to him about the time of its composition.

As Henry Moses said, in an introduction to an essay on vases, that there are “[f]ew remains of antiquity [that] have excited more interest than vases”, Keats too was really fascinated by ancient vases. As is well known, there are a lot of probable models for the ‘Urn’, and the Sosibios Vase in the Louvre and the Portland Vase in the British Museum can be counted among them. In a sense, vases were in vogue and one of the chief instigators was no doubt Sir William Hamilton, who actually owned the Portland Vase for some time.

The prints of both Vases are included in Moses’ Collection of Antique Vases published in 1814, which Keats probably knew, and a tracing or drawing of the ‘leaf-fringed’ Sosibios Vase by Keats’s own hand is left to us. ‘As
for the Portland Vase (fig. 4), Keats did not mention it, but somehow it was almost his rule not to mention any individual name of the ancient work of art, and so it is safe for us to say that he must have known the real Vase at the British Museum and its reproduction at Tassie’s shop. The Vase was exhibited on loan from the Duke of Portland from 1810 in the New Gallery of the Museum, built in the same year separated from the main edifice, and having ten rooms and compartments according to an article in the Gentleman’s Magazine (September 1810), where many famous items of the Townley Collection, Egyptian and Greek sculptures, vases and other relics were displayed.

Ian Jack’s treatment of the Portland Vase, I feel, is rather cursory, but he did not in fact see the pristine, intact Vase. The vase he saw was the one restored soon after it was smashed in 1845 by a lunatic into about two-hundred fragments. (Brooks, 1–10, 169–77) After the first restoration (the Vase has been restored three times up to now), the Vase was brought back to its place in the Museum again, but the brilliant lustre and smooth, flawless surface were no longer there. It was only a clumsily restored vase with patches, scars, large and small, all over it, totally different from the one Keats used to see, and so it is understandable that the vase would not have made a good impression on Jack.

But if the Townley Vase with its bacchic dancing had attracted Keats’s attention, his sense of beauty would not have missed the beautiful white frieze of cameos on the deep-blue Portland Vase along with its graceful “Attic shape” itself, which was displayed in the same Gallery. Besides, although there were, as probable models for the ‘Urн’, also the Borghese Vase with its bacchanal dancing and lovers, and the Holland House Vase with a sacrificial scene, no other vase was there available to Keats than the Portland Vase that could be expressed to be “with brede/ Of marble men and maidens overwrought”.

The pristine, flawless Vase attracted various prominent figures of the age of the Enlightenment including Winckelmann, Sir William Hamilton, Erasmus Darwin (Blake made four engravings of the frieze of the vase for his Botanic Garden), and Josiah Wedgwood, who made a renowned reproduction, but the reasons for its attraction were not only the refined form itself but various legends, attached to it from the very beginning of its discovery. (Wedgewood 13 ff.) In this cinerary urn, it was asserted, were contained the ashes of Alexander Severus and his mother Julia Mamaea, and as for the subject of the frieze many interpretations have been offered one after another, but a definite interpretation is yet to be offered.

In fact, by the time Keats saw the Vase, interpretations along with explanations by Winckelmann, Darwin and Wedgwood had already been offered, and Keats must have been well aware of them. Until about the early nineteenth century, an interpretation was prevalent which understood the frieze to be related to the birth of Alexander Severus in one phase and the decline of the Roman empire in the other, that is, two contrasting, but closely connected, subjects were found there. Although Winckelmann had offered quite a different interpretation, scarcely any attention was paid to it at that time. What is truly important is the fact that the Vase had been recognised as a cinerary urn from the time of its discovery, and this fact has something to do with the overall structure of the ‘Ode’, or at least Keats’s way of treating his imaginary urn.

For, it was customary to divide the design of the frieze of the Portland Vase into the first and second phases or compartments between the two face skins, and interpret the subject of each compartment. Likewise, in the ‘Ode’ the meanings of the frieze of the ‘Urн’ is asked one after another by the poet, and the frieze itself is divided into two parts each having a different but closely related subject: one depicts love and life, and the other desolation and death.
Now the story of the ‘Urn’ evolves in a circumstance of “silence and slow time”, that is, in a world of seeming eternity, and the poet is led into the feast of life, or the Bacchanalia, enacted by the statuesque figures, humans or gods, of the first phase of the frieze, experiencing a love that is “[f]or ever warm and still to be enjoyed”. And after that, he observes a procession led by the “mysterious priest” of the second phase towards another world. The statuesque procession will remind the reader of the Panathenaic procession, which is traditionally believed to be the main subject of the frieze of the Elgin Marbles, but by the time the poet comes to the second phase, his consciousness is torn between the real and the ideal: his artistic experience must necessarily bring him back to reality no matter how “crude and sore the journey homeward to habitual self” could be. He is aware of the fact that he cannot partake of the eternal love. While his love must end in “a burning forehead, and a parching tongue”, the urn’s love would perpetually be on the go. He is destined to be a member of another procession, whose final destination is, ironically enough, not the “green altar” but inside of the cinerary urn.

Just as the ancient artist carved changeless forms of beauty on the marble, which have survived, and will survive, the scythe of Time, the poet wishes to carve his own poetical stature of perennial beauty on the paper. Thus he finds a love that is held before fulfilment, immortalising the lovers’ passion, but, on the other hand, the procession he finds held before reaching the other world would immortalise man’s life on the brink of eternity, or in other words, those people in the beautiful procession are perpetually on the point of death but they never die: theirs is a deathless death. By stationing on the urn those figures eternally frozen on the point of consummating their earthly activity, Keats reminds us as well as himself that man’s earthly life is a perpetual move from becoming towards being, although the goal itself could not be reached as long as man lives on earth.

The statuesque images of love of the lovers and procession of the people are finally called “Cold Pastoral” only because they starkly distinguish man’s mortality from the immortality of artistic life. Still, the urn will continue to stimulate and enchant man across time with its refined shape itself and the stationed images on the surface of it. In this sense, such a beautifully frozen moment in the world of silence and slow time becomes eternity, an eternity which Keats may have first detected in the statues of the Elgin Marbles.

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