Chapter 10

The Grecian Urn

Life was wrought, according to a majority of thinkers of the early nineteenth century, in the interplay of opposing forces. In the captured motion of the frenzied figures on its surface, and in the intense, stressed quietude of its form (and in direct defiance of the old distinction between \textit{natura naturans} and \textit{natura naturata}), Keats's Grecian urn presents an image of life contained, with its contraries reconciled and energized process held at bay, and of infinite power gathered up and concentrated within a finite, hollowed space. Humboldt's myth of "The Genius of Rhodes" and the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" find common center in their portrayal of poised young lovers bound by the implicit energy of their potential union. Beyond this image, the myth and the ode appear to diverge. The former declares itself to be a myth of life, with traditional symbols of butterfly and torch,\(^1\) the latter is usually taken to be a measured ode to art, one that would seem to disregard all natural and supernatural machinery.

Humboldt's myth is an easily understood fable of the fact of organic life as proven by scientific research; it is intended as a simplified representation of life for scientific novices, complete with pendant for the slow-witted people of ancient Rhodes, and supplementary interpretation by a dull-brained philosopher. Keats's ode, with its silent urn and unheard melodies tells a flowery tale of a fictive city with simple folk and mysterious priest but no town historian; the attic form of the urn, silent like a tongueless Philomela or stonefaced Sphinx, "dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity" (44–45). The condition of the lovers in Humboldt's two paintings is at best equivocal: they face either the deprivation of love unconsummated, or the putrefying dissolution of chemical (albeit loving) union. The lovers on Keats's Grecian urn know a simple and pure devotion that is "All breathing human passion far above" (28); without knowledge of the tangible and painful contrast of mortal love, theirs is a "More happy love" because of the implicit contrast with the very knowledge of "a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd" from which they are saved.

Between Humboldt’s lovers in the first painting stands the primary figure of the genius of Rhodes, symbol of the controlling spirit of vitality operating everywhere in the organic world. In Keats’s ode there is no bright spirit of life to detract from the depiction of happy lovers, joyous sacrifice, and empty town; the marble urn, possessed by the artist’s energizing and unifying genius of imagination, is the primary and only figure of the ode.

Perfect power is power contained and able to contain itself. The genius of vital force, natural philosophers of the early nineteenth century would agree, is the restraint of this force’s natural expression. The “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” singing “A song of love, too sweet for earthly lyres” (Lamia, I, 299), is first and foremost a celebration of the stasis and stationing of life and love made possible by art in spite of the irremissible power and necessarily changing currents of life. The urn’s stasis is its perfection; its depiction of stasis, meanwhile, is a symbol of the perfection of art. The sonnet “Bright star,” which may have been drafted just before the ode,2 invokes those very virtues of art that we have come to see embodied in the Grecian urn: steadfastness, self-sufficient splendor within teeming nature, unchangeability of form and brightness within a natural flux of light and motion. The term “Fair attitude” joins these virtues by suggesting (according to the Oxford English Dictionary) both the “disposition of a figure in statuary or painting; hence the posture given to it” and a “posture of the body proper to, or implying, some action or mental state.” The urn’s stationing of life and containment of energies peculiar to life involve, hence, a conceptual or figurative act, an imaginative component not necessarily represented in material life.

When speaking of the perceiving or transmutative force as the power responsible for universal life, Schiller allowed that such a force “may be inconceivable” since if one does not “perceive the transmutative force itself on the occasion of each perceptual act but only alterations in it that register external changes, it is excluded per se from our field of perception.” We perceive signs or alterations in the life force but we cannot conceive of it. But just because one cannot “experience the transmutative force,” Schiller goes on to argue in his essay on the philosophy of physiology, “should this then make it an impossibility? I am unable to perceive change without motion, and yet I am still convinced that thought is not motion. Who would be so unjust that he would not accept this as true of the transmutative force also? This force is not a total philosophical impossibility, and does not need to be probable provided that it really exists.”3 The inability to conceive of or experience the life force, to know only the alterations of it manifest in external changes, does not refute its existence. Something along the order of this reasoning governs our first perception of the Grecian urn’s achievement (and art) in the first two stanzas of the ode. The static and lifeless art of the urn purportedly captures life and the motions of life. It does so by invoking the poised figures of young lovers common to so many figurative representations of the life force. Blackstone has said that the hollow urn “is a center of power,” that elemental earth, water,
fire, and air “are powers, energies, which concentrate themselves in the silence of the sacred form. . . . The potter builds the same energies into the urn, on his scale, as the Demiurge built into the universal urn-form at its creating.” The urn holds still the turning, ebbing universe of its creator. By capturing the moving figures of tree, lover, townsfolk, priest, and heifer, the Grecian urn implicitly captures the inconceivable and elusive but nevertheless existing life. Mortal life becomes, through the urn, immortal. The Grecian urn, thus, does much more than its outward form would suggest. Its art transcends its own lifelessness to portray life. Its hollow form implies both the potential and the perfection of creation.

But, lest we forget, this is an ode built on paradox. It could well be that the urn does far less than what first it promises.

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
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!
Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d
For ever panting, and for ever young;
(15–27)

The stasis of the urn’s art, given image and form in the lines above, suggests a curious suspended state, a foster life born of endless recurrence, an unnatural condition that combines quietude and agitation. The “Ode on Indolence,” where the three sleepwalking figures—“like figures on a marble urn” (5)—directly recall those on the Grecian urn, also presents a disturbing picture of a static, recurring condition marked by alternating excitation and lassitude. The poet of “Indolence” begins and ends in the same mood, and the fleeting agitation that the figures’ repeated appearances elicit from him is finally overcome by indolence. Furthermore, the “masque-like figures on the dreamy urn” of indolence (56) manifest within their lassitudinal forms an implicit interior agitation: Ambition shows fatigue and is pale of cheek from some prior exertion, and the serene figure of Poesy bears a visage “most unmeek” (26–30). The silent attitude of the urn, we now recall, bears a curious “brede / Of marble men and maidens overwrought” upon its surface (41–42). “Overwrought” means fashioned upon the exterior of the urn, but it could also mean at this period “exhausted by overwork,” “worked up to too high a pitch,
Brunonian physicians of this time claimed that life depended upon an even maintenance of the principle of excitability: an excess of agitation or stimuli worked the body at too high a pitch to produce a state of overwrought intensity, a condition that masked but directly presaged imminent, deathly exhaustion. The condition of the overwrought lovers (and the hyperactive townsfolk at the sacrifice) could well be diagnosed as a diseased state of excessive excitement or stimulation; theirs is an artful but nevertheless realistic expression of the false energy that precedes debility, a hollow manifestation of life and love. Their connection with the disturbed figures of the "Ode on Indolence"—invoked variously by Keats as "shades," "Ghosts," and "Phantoms"—certainly grows closer when they are viewed as the ghostly and overwrought victims of sthenic excitation, the unnatural stilled agitation preceding death.

The diagnosis grows more true yet when cast with Spence's description of Eros-Anteros in Greek mythological art: the pair of cupids at the feet of the Venus de Medici represented, for example, Eros and Anteros. The former was considered "the cause of love; and the other, as the cause of its ceasing"; and "a Cupid fondling or burning a butterfly, is just the same with them as a Cupid caressing or tormenting the goddess Psyche, or the soul." Lovers are alternately caressed and tormented. In Keats's poetry, if we may take the examples of Endymion and the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," they can be caressed to life and their wings nurtured to new flights of fancy, or they can be frenzied to death—tormented at fever pitch and without completion until, wingless, they become sods to their own high requiem. The scene of "wild ecstasy" depicted on the cold surface of the urn becomes, in this contest, a frenzied scene willfully evoking the familiar medical signs of dis-ease and exhausted life at the end of its tether. The scene is reminiscent of the cultivated fear and anxiety of the discarded first stanza to the "Ode on Melancholy." The unremitting, high-pitched unfulfillment of the lovers depicted in the scene, meanwhile, finds parallel with the "forced state" of excitability we witness in the crazed knight of "La Belle Dame sans Merci," whose pale brow, "anguish moist and fever dew" (9-10) are symbolic testament and medical sign to his condition of unconsummated and therefore self-consumptive love.

The urn's lifeless but immortal lovers would appear to represent neither the warm love of mortal passion nor the genial nurturing of living blood-friendship; theirs, rather, is the torment of relentless unconsummation, of love imagined intensely but not felt that medical thinkers of the early nineteenth century recognized as the particular terminal symptom of the exhausted but unnaturally excited consumptive patient. Dying tubercular patients loved too much, not wisely, and without relief. Mortal love’s consummation produces "a heart high-sorrowful and cloy’d" (or putrefying union according to Humboldt); immortal love, like that represented on the urn or witnessed by the besotted knight of "La Belle Dame" provokes the petrifying condition of stilled action and unanswerable need preceding death: "A burning forehead, and a parching

“When from this wreathed tomb shall I awake!
When move in a sweet body fit for life,
And love, and pleasure, and the ruddy strife
Of heart and lips!”

(Lamia, I, 38–41)

Lamia’s wreathed tomb is composed of a cold and hollow snakeskin that is shed and replaced each spring, and a torpid body that subsists in icy stillness all winter long. Her sepulchred condition as a snake in a “serpent prison-house” is nevertheless better than that of Shelley’s Beatrice Cenci, who, once she has been tainted by the violence of forced union and unnatural affinity with her father, can see herself only as dead and imprisoned in a medium of putrefying flesh:

No, I am dead! These putrefying limbs
Shut round and sepulchre the panting soul
Which would burst forth into the wandering air!

(III, i, 26–28)

The choice between immortal snakehood and mortal indeterminacy is clear for Lamia: she chooses what some scientists of the time had defined as the endless strife and attraction between chemical elements, and what some philosophers had described as the polarized energy manifest in the meeting of opposing forces within an organic wholeness: “a sweet body fit for life, / And love, and pleasure and the ruddy strife / Of heart and lips!” Lamia’s love as a mortal woman is far removed from the static happiness of the urn’s lovers. Her passing mortal life, kindred to the experiential flux of Endymion’s Indian Maid—“With all her limbs on tremble, and her eyes / Shut softly up alive” (IV, 103–4)—bears no conceivable relation to the enduring lovers, trees, and townsfolk molded upon the urn’s enduring form.

The urn’s figures are conceived through what they cannot experience. Certainly from the experiential perspective of breathing passion’s “burning forehead,” “heart high-sorrowful” and “the ruddy strife / Of heart and lips,” more is deprived of them than is bestowed. The Greek artist’s happy youth are, in fact, “Chilly lovers,” “aguish fairies” with “frozen breath, / Colder than the mortal death” (“Song of Four Fairies,” 64–67). Above “All breathing human passion,” the urn’s bloodless lovers are also beyond the “stimulus of death.” It is in this, their undisturbed condition of suspended, artful excitation, that the urn’s lovers reveal their disturbing connection with those “Poor lovers” preserved in eternal sleep in Book III of Endymion.
So in that crystal place, in silent rows,
Poor lovers lay at rest from joys and woes—
The stranger from the mountains, breathless, trac’d
Such thousands of shut eyes in order plac’d;
Such ranges of white feet, and patient lips
All ruddy,—for here death no blossom nips.

(735-40)

Keats, as yet unable to mix his metaphors like Milton, arranges his anesthetized lovers “line by line” like “warriors thousands on the field supine” (733-34): dead like the gunshot-wounded, stiffened corpses found scattered upon a battlefield (which John Hunter had once made the focus of his research on the life of blood), they nevertheless masquerade the ruddy life of live soldiers in the orderly action of battle. The metaphor continues, depicting them as angelic embryos in a briny womb with shut eyes, patient lips, smooth brows, and wrists crossed at the heart (738-44), immune at once to the ripening of life and death. The lovers’ crypt is a place of immaturity. And in this unreal “crystal place” of their resting, as upon the pale surface of the Grecian urn, death has no dominion—the ravages of putrefaction are held at bay because the stimulus of death that triggers it (and presupposes life) is missing.

The dead lovers of Book III of Endymion, an orderly arrangement of once-living forms suspended in the saline embalming solution of their magical underwater cell, are thus preserved like specimens in a Hunterian medical museum. The analogy grows stronger when we note that the “bright portal” of this tomb-museum beneath “unfathom’d brine” is wrought of “a fabric crystalline, / Ribb’d and inlaid with coral, pebble, and pearl,” which leads to a cavern “vast, and desolate, and icy” (627-29, 632). This is a place distinctly reminiscent of the Dead Sea and its volcanic environs as described by Alexander Mar cet (see discussion above) in his analysis of the sea’s saline inability to support life while yet preserving life’s shells and skeletal forms. It is also a place reminiscent of Buffon’s underwater caverns of preserved fossils described in the opening pages of Histoire Naturelle. Glaucus leaves the dead Scylla in a niche of this vault, but as he flees his “scathing dread / Met palsy half way,” and his limbs become “Gaunt, wither’d, sapless, feeble, cramp’d, and lame” (635-38); his accelerated aging in this place is similar to the fate of titanic Saturn in The Fall of Hyperion, whose face, resembling that of Blake’s Urizen, wrinkles as he falls to his final resting place (I, 225). This last abode, moreover, is no less cold, desolate and lifeless than the lover’s saline crypt in Endymion, and Saturn lies there preserved, along with his withered and superannuated race, as a nerveless shell of his former self (I, 310-24).

Regions such as these can be dissolved in the dream-world of Endymion; their pictures of desolate emptiness can be dispelled for life-filled visions of decrepit lovers regaining their youth, or dead lovers revitalized in their watery tombs like those seed-embryos given life by Shelley’s West Wind. Blood can
be made to flow through the cold bodies of the lovers in *Endymion*, but neither art nor vision can send it coursing through the icy veins of the Titans in *The Fall of Hyperion*—or through the marbled features of the lovers graven upon the Grecian urn. Where the dream world of *Endymion* is composed of ethereal substances that ascend, slip, slide, and vaporize, the worlds of the urn and *The Fall of Hyperion*, also dream-structures but cast as visions of perfection and Druidic endurance, are formed of more ponderous substance: petrified stone.

Circumstance or event in both latter poems, moreover, remind us of the stories of petrification connected with the stone rings in the English countryside, and in particular of the legend associated with the Stanton Drew stone circles, located just above Glastonbury near Bath, which Keats may well have visited on his way to Bath to see Bailey during his tour of Devon and Cornwall. The Stanton Drew legend, born of a most “dismal cirque / Of druid stones, upon a forlorn moor” (*Hyp.*, II, 34–35), tells, according to the eighteenth-century antiquarian William Stukeley, of a wedding party during which the couple and guests are led to dance through the night, endlessly and with ever-increasing frenzy, by the hypnotic music of an evil and mad musician; the music ceases at dawn when the piper disappears, and the young celebrants are left petrified forever in the marbled postures of frenzied joy and despair upon the silent moor.

The cold kinship of marble between the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and *The Fall of Hyperion* presents itself at once. When the poet of *The Fall of Hyperion* drinks from “a cool vessel of transparent juice,” a “cloudy swoon” comes upon him and he sinks “Like a Silenus on an antique vase” (*I*, 42, 56). “When sense of life return’d,” the poet sees before him “the carved sides”

Of an old sanctuary with roof august,
Built so high, it seem’d that filmed clouds
Might spread beneath, as o’er the stars of heaven;
So old the place was, I remembered none
The likes upon the earth; what I had seen
Of grey cathedrals, buttress’d walls, rent towers,
The superannuations of sunk realms,
Or nature’s rocks toil’d hard in waves and winds,
Seem’d but the faulture of decrepit things
To that eternal domed monument.

(*I*, 62–71)

The superannuations of nature and civilization alike are but poor patterns, the faulture of decrepit things in comparison to this marbled monument to the passage of time and life. This monumental old sanctuary confines and encloses: a “silent massy range” of columns “ending in mist / Of nothing” delineate its spaces to the north and south; to the east “black gates / Were shut against the sunrise evermore”; a massive effigy and an altar, meanwhile, guard...
the western entrance to this vault and mark the place where all journeys of Nekyia end. Two sets of stairs lead to the altar at this western entrance (I, 83–92). Altar, stairs, and balustrade, like the sanctuary itself, are all formed of marble.

Like the faults in ancient ruins and the geological fissures of prehistoric rock formations, the old sanctuary is a monument to time without life, to an endurance that is possible once the signs of life have been stilled or removed. The hollow vault of this monument contains the stilled forms of the once-powerful Titans within its marble confines, much as that other marble vessel of containment, the Grecian urn, holds the forms of life apart from the process of living. Flesh and common dust are no match to the cold endurance of marble, the poet of The Fall of Hyperion is told:

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"If thou canst not ascend
These steps, die on that marble where thou art.
Thy flesh, near cousin to the common dust,
Will parch for lack of nutriment—thy bones
Will wither in few years, and vanish so
That not the quickest eye could find a grain
Of what thou now art on that pavement cold."
(I, 107–13)
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The poet's living response to the stimulus of cold marble is graphic and physiologically correct: his blood congeals, as John Hunter said it must. Feeling "the tyranny / Of that fierce threat" (119–20), and striving "hard to escape / The numbness" wrought upon his senses by the tyranny of marble, the poet diagnoses his own condition: "the cold / Grew stifling, suffocating, at the heart; / And when I clasp'd my hands I felt them not. / [Until] One minute before death, my iced foot touch'd / The lowest stair" (127–33). Living blood, according to the anatomical observations of John Hunter, responded to the challenge of injury or exposure to its living power by coagulating so as to promote healing and regeneration. The blood's living response to the insurmountable stimulus of death was a final coagulating stillness and stiffening, wherein the blood's warm energy cohered with the cold power of death so as to nullify life-giving opposition and produce instead a life form that was no longer alive. We are to recognize the kind of stimulus that the poet's senses feel emanating from the monumental tyranny of marble before him:

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when suddenly a palsied chill
Struck from the paved level up my limbs,
And was ascending quick to put cold grasp
Upon those streams that pulse beside the throat
(I, 122–25)
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This is the stimulus of death, an overweening coldness that elicits not con-
continuing opposition but one single terminal response that manifests itself in kin-
dred coldness and quietude. In The Fall of Hyperion the poet is able at the last 
moment to counter the deadly stimulus that strikes from the marble pave-
ment. His mortal effort to attain the stairs proves sufficient creative energy to
counter the implacable stillness of immortal marble; because of the contin-
ued opposition, “life seem’d / To pour in at the toes” (133–34). The poet’s 
living creative energy is mortal, a power “to die and live again” before the 
fated hour (142) that the original sculptor of the Grecian urn also owned once.
Because this is a mortal power, it is one denied alike to the energyless but
immortal Titans and to the everlasting figures carved upon the Grecian urn.
Far from responding with creative opposition, the lovers carved upon the urn
and the Titans postured within their monument express terminal kinship with
their marble medium; they endure because of it, not in spite of it. They
provide only the semblance of a continuing opposition between medium and
living form, the creative tension of life belongs to their mortal artists alone.

We can compare these Marbles to nothing but human figures petrified: they have
every appearance of absolute fac-similes or casts taken from nature [Hazlitt says], . . .
The utter absence of all setness of appearance proves that they were done as
studies from actual models. The separate parts of the human body may be given
from scientific knowledge:—their modifications or inflections can only be learnt by
seeing them in action . . . . The veins, the wrinkles in the skin, the indications of the
muscles under the skin (which appears as plainly to the anatomist as the expert
angler knows from an undulation on the surface of the water what fish is playing
with his bait beneath it), the finger-joints, the nails, every the smallest part
cognisable to the naked eye, is given here with the same ease and exactness, with
the same prominence, and in the same subordination, that it would be in a cast
from nature, i.e. in nature itself.  

We see the beauty of the Elgin Marbles, according to Hazlitt, through the
expert eyes of the anatomist whose art can station and reveal the processes of
life. The Marbles are stilled forms of life that fulfill their art through being
preserved or removed from life. They are human figures petrified, like fossils
or glacial tides, in the postures of living motion, “fac-similes or casts taken from
nature” complete with every physiological detail available through keen scient-
fic observation. Veins, muscles, finger joints, and nails of these postures are
rendered so visually true by the artist-anatomist that we would sense the
motions of life processes beneath the skin. The signs of life appear present, to
be recognized and read by passing observer and diagnosing physician alike,
even as the symptoms of life are missing and the fluidity of life process is
frozen. Hazlitt’s characterization of the enduring beauty of the Elgin Marbles
reiterates for us the chilling connections between the congealing blood within
once-living flesh witnessed by the anatomist, the petrification of once-living forms and moving waters witnessed by geologists, the Druidic rock formations
of the Titans to whose former existence Moneta bears witness as “sole priestess” of their present desolation, and the marbled figures (of lovers, musician, priest, and townsfolk) borne upon the Grecian urn in mute testimony to its mortal sculptor’s wholesome vision of a living festival incorporating the many contraries of love and sacrifice. All are monuments, or victims, of “slow time.” The Elgin Marbles mingle “Grecian grandeur with the rude / Wasting of old time” (sonnet, 12–13) necessarily, and to no less degree of intensity than does the poet’s vision of the wasted Titans petrified in their faultured sanctuary, or the poet’s picture of the Grecian urn as a “foster-child of silence and slow time” (2).

The poet of The Fall of Hyperion looks past the marble altar and through the veils covering Moneta’s face into the “hollow brain” and “dark secret chambers of her skull” (276–77) that contain the crumbling vault of memory and time wherein the Titans must endure in pain. He looks with “the quickest eye” of the anatomist alert to every detail and symptom, and with the interpretive power of the physician-poet to the meaning of every sign thus seen. He sees the Titans changed past change. The “two shapes” of Thea and Saturn, once “postured motionless, / Like natural sculpture in cathedral cavern” over one long “moon, with alteration slow” in Hyperion (I, 83–86), are now “fixed shapes” enwombed forever beyond the passage of cyclic time, at the farthest remove from the processes of life.

Long, long, these two were postured motionless,
Like sculpture builded upon the grave
Of their own power. A long awful time
I look’d upon them; still they were the same;
The frozen God still bending to the earth,
And the sad Goddess weeping at his feet;
Moneta silent. Without stay or prop
But my own weak mortality, I bore
The load of this eternal quietude,
The unchanging gloom, and the three fixed shapes
Ponderous upon my senses . . .

(Fall of Hyp., I, 382–92)

The Titans are past change, past “The lily and the snow,” because they are the full and completed victims of the laws of change and process common to all evolutionary life. No longer compared to “natural sculpture in cathedral cavern,” the Titans are now “sculpture builded up upon the grave / Of their own power.” They are like those described in Endymion as “not yet dead, / But in old marbles ever beautiful” (I, 318–19), and their power is one less strong and less feeling than the poet’s “own weak mortality.” Like the Elgin Marbles (which were themselves builded upon the cold remnant of a once-living igneous rock to commemorate the wonders of a passing civilization), the Titans are bleak
shadows of a former magnitude ("On Seeing the Elgin Marbles," 14). Without the power "to live and die," and except for the skilled intensity of their pictured pain, the Titans are without sense. At one with the rocks and stones of their abode, they know only "the feel of not to feel it" in drear-nighted December (21). The "eternal quietude" of their dis-eased condition bodes ill for the immortal achievements of other petrified forms.

Saved by art from the natural law of process as perfection espoused in *Hyperion*, the Grecian urn and its fabled figures nevertheless show their kinship with those perfected figures in *The Fall of Hyperion* who have experienced this law in full measure. The undying happiness of the urn's young lovers bears curious resemblance to the aged Titans' immortal inability to feel anything fully, the lovers' finely honed excitation wrought to excess parallels the numbing senselessness of the fallen gods' excessive pain. Humboldt's fable of the Genius of Rhodes was a myth of life, of that which resists putrefaction; its figures of vibrant and exhausted lovers would stand thus as ironic patterns for the flowery tale of the Grecian urn whose statuary figures, far from resisting, welcome petrifaction on an attic shape. "How get from lifeless marble life and pain?" the poet Chamisso asks of his lifeless statue;9 his lament on nature's ultimate ability to evade all artistic media is one common to all artists, including those ancients of the Elgin Marbles. In reverse, in spite of and perhaps because of its beauty, the urn's marble art is the art of *méduse*, the transfixing of action and the turning into stone. Life's energetic polarities are stopped up, and its fluidities are drained; all action is stilled, stationed, made stone. Early-nineteenth-century mechanists and vitalists alike proposed that motion was necessary to life, but the urn renounces motion in favor of the cessation of action; it chooses the symptoms of death that it might endure in a manner artful of life. Indeed, if the fate of the lovers who can never kiss and of the musician who may never leave his song carries overtones of necessity and coercion,10 then the fault lies as much in the medium as in the art. As evocations of life matter, these lamentations of fading beauty, fevered love, and wrinkling despair reiterate, by contrast, the coercions of the marble medium.

The urn's white figures transfixed in their happiness, even as they triumphantly resist the natural law espoused in *Hyperion*, necessarily bear a deathly connection to those frozen statues with "carved features" marbled by pain that frame the poet's aching vision of *The Fall of Hyperion* (I, 225). Postured motionless upon the grave of their own power, the three "fixed shapes" fulfill the laws of natural reciprocity—or the exchange of powers between opposing energies in nature—in relation to their mortal witness. The poet's "own weak mortality" must bear the load of their "eternal quietude" without stay or prop; and, in turn, the unchanging gloom and quietude of these fixed shapes feed reciprocal and ponderous upon the poet's life senses (I, 382–93). No wonder, then, that the domineering sight of the Titans leaves the poet with a heart too small to hold its blood (I, 254). We are forced to ask whether the "leaf-fring'd legend[s]"
that haunt about the shape of the urn (5) do not also draw life and sustenance from their mortal counterparts in a manner similar not only to the deathly albeit "not yet dead" Titans but also to the chilling and hungry presence from beyond the grave in the poem "This living hand." Surely, the "marble men and maidens overwrought" graven upon the urn, and the haunting "silent form" of that brooding "bride of quietness" itself (42-44), bear a relationship of reciprocal exchange with their mortal contacts and seek "fulfillment" in their immortal stasis from the finite sense energies and blood of living motion.

The "Fair attitude" of the Grecian urn invoked by Keats in the last stanza of the ode is that marble object's accomplished fulfillment as a postured attitude of life. "Taken from nature," to borrow Hazlitt's phrase, the Grecian urn takes from nature. It is an artifact framed against natural patterns, with its figures sustained by the very living actions that they cannot perform. It is a cold pastoral that draws out the signs of life and empties to desolation a little town that it might "with garlands" dress its hollow form.

What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.
(35-40)

It is a flaw in happiness to see beyond our bourne. The poet in Keats must set against the purported festival of gods, men, and beasts artfully represented upon the urn his own imaginings of a ghostly town deprived of all the signs of life—its streets empty and silent, its desolation unaccounted for, and, since none "can e'er return," without promise of change or reinstitution of the life cycle to its "peaceful citadel." What the poet sees by seeing too far beyond the surface festival of the urn reveals a habit of perceptual vision learned from his earlier profession of medicine.

Medical semiotics of the time sought to look beneath the manifest symptoms of a body to those more interpretable, universal signs of healthy or diseased life. The Romantic physician was charged to invoke his trained eye and penetrating vision to read beneath the smooth surfaces of an otherwise healthy body the yet-to-be-manifest signs of corroding disease, and to see beyond the specific symptoms of a ruptured organ or part to the larger signs of universal disturbance in the organism. Poet and physician look thus at elusive mortal life as it is stilled and made accessible within the confines of an immortal Grecian urn. Keats sees not just a town emptied of life by sacrifice (be this human festival or natural epidemic), nor just a demented musician playing songs that he alone can hear, but trees unable to shed their leaves or "ever bid the spring adieu"—condemned thereby to a permanent
embryonic state that by avoiding death permits no ripeness. He sees, furthermore, beyond the happy picture of lovers who can neither fade nor have their bliss, the disturbing vision of unconsummated love and the deprived passion of phthisis. The urn's lovers are forever panting but nevertheless above all breathing, in clear sign of the wasting disease of the consumptive patient whose chest (or heart) is always too small to hold his breath (or blood). Below the trees' eternal springtime lurk the specific symptoms of retarded growth. Beneath the lovers' wild ecstasy and the musician's obsessive and unending melody resides a chronic condition of ill health that precedes the terminal exhaustion of tuberculosis and madness.

If these visions be occasions of seeing too far, at once too clinical and too close to the dark moods and corrosive vision described in the verse-epistle to Reynolds, and they are indeed forms of those shadowed visitings to the "soul's daytime / In the dark void of night" (70–71), we must nevertheless face the first verity of the Grecian urn: it is hollow. The marbled figures of joy and pious ritual that garland the smooth surface of the urn mask a vacuous space. The urn's quietude partakes of this echoing vacuity and to it belong the toneless ditties of the too-spiritual musician and the desolate silence of the abandoned town. If the urn has a mysterious tale to tell, it cannot tell it lest it undermine the fraught indeterminacy of its artistic content.

The ashes of the dead, the wine for sacred libations, the perfumed oil for ritual initiation or embalmment, the katharmata or herbal potpourri of ancient medicine, grain offerings to the gods of the autumnal harvest—these are some of the possible substances for which the Grecian urn was once made. The ode itself steers us away from speculations as to the specifics of content by focusing on the surface of the urn and the quietude of its form. Its inner space thus becomes full of potential significance, a region of promise illimitable by the specifics of known entities. Blackstone has seen in the urn's very hollowness the ultimate example of resonant receptacles in Keats's poetry. "His verse moves among resonant hollows, foci of speechful silence. The winds breathe 'Eolian magic from their lucid wombs'; sea-noises in caves are therapeutic; Moneta displays 'In the dark secret chambers of her skull' the agonies of a fallen dynasty. Power dwells in these spaces. And power is gathered up, constantly, into 'the supreme shape' of the urn." But what if power is not contained within the urn but, rather, haunts about the figures upon its surface who themselves draw power from mortal life? To what extent is the hollow urn the obverse of Moneta's skull, a false pregnancy, a gravid container that is merely filled with the ashes of life where the other teems with living memory and pain? Nothing in our experience of Keats's mature poetry would favor the highly affirmative interpretation: nightingale flights escape us, the gods' picnics prove to be the abandoned refuse of a meal, and the celebrations of autumn can be of its most minimal offerings. What if the echoing space contained within the urn be nothing but a reminder of life resonant with unfulfillment like the old shells of mollusks, or the husks and
stalks of summer fruits left behind by angels for the poet to taste as best he can, or the sedimentary deposits forming desolate natural sanctuaries, or the marble remnants sculpted for a civilization long dead?

"And, silent as a consecrated urn" (Endymion, III, 32). The very lines that critics have invoked in justifying the interpretation of the Grecian urn as a receptacle of sacred power also suggest for Blackstone that it is a funerary vessel. But if the phrase "silent as a consecrated urn" promises sacred presence therein, the original draft of this line reads not as a promise but as a threat of eternal meaninglessness: “And silent, as a corpse upon a pyre.” The urn of Keats’s ode contains emptiness as easily as it does sacred significance; its purported sacred signification could be as easily of good as of ill. We are reminded of Hesiod’s story of Pandora and the jar full of evils. In it, the concept common to many mythologies of a receptacle whose magic contents are either an asset or a liability depending upon their treatment combines with the ritual of the “Opening of the Jars” of new wine in the Dionysiac festival of the Anthesteria. The wines of the Dionysiac festival were magical substances or pharmaka whose portent could be positive and healthful or sinister, but Pandora’s jar bore specifically evil elements; more portentous and implicitly sinister than an urn bearing the remains of the dead, the jar restrained active powers of negation within its confines. It undermined both the benevolence of immortal beings and the artistic claims of order of mortal civilizations.

The urn of Keats’s ode encloses an ambiguous space. While we may see this vacancy as without portent and merely part of the Grecian urn’s ductile art, it is expressive nevertheless of the object’s infinite ability to define its existence through the absence and negation of mortal life. The urn, we recall, is bloodless. It proposes a most singular love without passion, to renounce both parthenogenesis and what Erasmus Darwin called “the chef d’oeuvre” or “masterpiece of nature,” that it might better protect itself from the consequences of consummation. Its marble medium lacks the characteristic sympathy of living tissue, energy is drawn from mortal existence and consumed into its vacant shape without reciprocity, and the urn’s only mortal kinship is with the motionless and already dead petrified forms in nature. As a unravished bride of quietness, the urn shares harmful symptoms with the victims of hysteria familiar to early-nineteenth-century medicine, for it can neither speak nor tell why it is desolate. As a “friend to man,” it is a distracting enigma that, without thought itself, teases us out of thought. The extent of the urn’s achievement as a wrought work of art is undermined finally, as also are the Elgin Marbles in Keats’s sonnet, by the pathos of what is absent. Without consciousness, or even the ability to know what it lacks, the urn is also without life.

In the first three stanzas of the ode Keats at once visualizes the urn’s consummate accomplishment as art and consummates his own ability to celebrate such achievement. The lines of the third stanza celebrating the fair
attitude of a love that is “For ever warm and still to be enjoyed” mark a moment of intensity wherein the artistic vision of fulfillment—as much for the artifact and its sculptor as for the ode and its poet—becomes achieved perfection. We are accustomed to seeing such moments in Keats’s poetry turn “to poison while the bee-mouth sips.” The poet-physician sees too far into the signs of passing fulfillment; occasions of integration are undermined by the sudden awareness of the dissolution and reversal that must follow; and the stationed perfections of art coincide abruptly with the dislocated truths of reality. For example, in the odes to autumn and to a nightingale, the celebration of autumn becomes a wailful choir to autumn’s most minimal signs of life (“last oozings,” chafe, and stubbled plains), and the poet’s flight of fancy with the nightingale reveals at the very moment of purported identification (stanza 5) his blind distinctions from the bird. So also does the achieved vision of a love forever warm in the third stanza of the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” turn abruptly upon this love’s mortal contraries:

For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d
For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy’d,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

The cloying counters of mortal love, a heart high-sorrowful, a burning forehead, a parching tongue, heighten by contrast the perfection of immortal love pictured upon the urn. We are informed of the vast distance that separates this picture of fulfillment from the world of consummated love, represented in the “Ode to a Nightingale” as a place “Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies” and “Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, / Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow” (26, 29–30). The leavings and remainders of mortal love follow too close and cast too dark a retrospective shadow upon the portrait of everlasting love. Awareness ensues, necessarily, that this is but an attitude of warm love maintained by artistic fiat upon the cold and stilled surface of a Grecian urn.

The last two stanzas of the ode cannot continue to celebrate this mockery of love. There must be an alternate or other side of what has been represented so far of love and life upon a funerary jar. Indeed, much as Humboldt’s fable of the Genius of Rhodes provided a pendant to the painting of anticipatory but restrained young lovers, which served as the means of fulfilling and explaining what had been promised of life in the original portrait, so also do the last two stanzas of Keats’s ode serve as a pendant picture or ironic coda to what has been pictured of immortal love and life on one side of the urn. Keats’s alternate vision of a reality composed of mysterious ritual and lifeless town is a sacrificial summary, born of mortal and perceptual necessity, of an earlier unreal vision of poised perfection.
Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
(31-37)

Questions distance us, as they did in the opening stanza of the ode, from the recently achieved integration of the third stanza. We are presented with the ambiguous image of a priest, cast suspiciously like a Grecian version of the Pied Piper of German folklore, leading a multitude of eager and anticipatory townsfolk to a green altar where they can watch the sacrificial goring of their favorite ox.

We are led to wonder to what extent this sacrifice, performed presumably for the sacred fulfillment of the mesmerized attendants, is a violent substitute for the restrained passion and lack of consummation represented on the other side of the urn. The “unravished bride of quietness,” with the help of a charming priest, has plundered a quiet and retiring little town. The town “emptied of this folk, this pious morn” by the artist’s too-vivid imagination of the ritual’s consequences, resides in insular security or pious indifference “by river or sea shore,” or atop a mountain as a “peaceful citadel.” “Pious” is a suspect word in the Keats lexicon, and the “peaceful citadel” provides peace at the expense of the high walls of its fortress, which are designed as much to keep its inhabitants within and in subjection as to protect them from external threat and knowledge. The “little” town’s empty fate to forever “silent be,” which is graven upon the dark inside of an equally empty urn, is perhaps bathetic, the more so when we speculate that its silent streets might parody the heavy and sacred silence of the urn’s “silent form.” Too many flanks, meanwhile, endow that sacrificial heifer that imposes herself upon our sight with “all her silken flanks with garlands drest.” Lest we have failed to hear the unexpected dissonances of the stanza, or note the willful near-rhymes of “priest” and “drest,” “sacrifice” and “skies,” even “morn” and “return,” we are jarred alert by the heifer’s lowing—loud, long, and discordant. This is the only heard melody of the entire ode. Not soft pipes or joyful timbrels but a cacaphonic bovine cry from a virginal animal that breaks the ponderous silence and protests (with good reason) the impending sacrifice. Life asserts itself with brute energy over ritual and art. On this pious morn the sacred has overflown its container.

A hellish nose peeps through the curtains of transcendent vision, the mermaids grow toes, witch’s eyes sport above a cherub’s mouth, wild boars show their tusks, and a cow’s frightened cry can disrupt the artistry of man and nature, and signal the disjunctions beneath the smooth surface of marbled
men and maidens. The nightmare vision of the verse-epistle to Reynolds shadows with a vengeance the wrong side of the Grecian urn. The triumphant manifesto uttered in high tone, "Beauty is truth," is followed by a dark echo, "truth beauty" uttered in low monotone.

The poet has seen behind the images of the ancient sculptor and too far forward to an eternal fierce destruction. Hence, the Grecian urn of Keats's ode tells no story. Its depictions have no recognizable connection to mythology or ancient rite, and none of the connections to specific mysteries that, say, Darwin's Portland Vase has to the Eleusinian stories. Nor do its pictures bear any knowable significance to the personal history of the ancient artist. Keats willfully withholds legend, myth, and history; he provides selective images instead and addresses specific but nevertheless ambiguous figures of make-believe passion and violence. What the urn represents on its surface is deliberately not represented in full to us. The complete ode is more a minimal than a measured ode to art; it celebrates art through the least that art can accomplish. At its least, to the ironic vision of the last stanzas, the Grecian urn is an "Attic shape," a quaint nonsensical fragment of the magnitude that was the Elgin Marbles. At its best, to the same excoriating vision, the urn is a "Fair attitude" of life, a cold and unheard sylvan paean that fails its subject and neglects to speak of love.

A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.
(End., I, 1–5)

The Grecian urn's achievement as a thing of beauty, estimated by Keats's ode, is a tempered version of the claim above. Its loveliness is constant; it has the potential to be "ravished" by "...vow time" and crumble to nothingness; its quiet bower echoes with the possibility of violence and sacrifice; and its sleep of quietude may well mask unquiet breathing, breathless exhaustion induced by unconsummated excitation, and unhealthy deprivation. By the end of the ode, the Grecian urn's attempt to transcend the disorders and unpleasantries of life is shown to be doubly imperfect: its art ultimately has proceeded to transcend life itself, and its artistic perfection is undermined by the very processes of life. Drawing energy and image from reality, the urn is delineated by reality.

John Bayley spoke to the origins of this dilemma when he marked that among the English Romantics it was Keats (and Byron) who first revealed "the kind of anxiety and guilt about the relation of art to reality" that is now common to contemporary poetry. "To be so much aware of the division between life and literature is to see life, involuntarily, as a literary concept: 'life for life's sake' is no more and no less meaningful than 'art for art's sake,'
because it expresses the same attitude to both.” If “poetry was both the whole
of life and a dream that must be rejected in favor of life,” then the ambigu-
ous invocations of art and life of the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” are microcosmic
formulations of a larger poetic debate.

Unlike Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium,” the ode does not make clear the
distinctions between art and life the better to gather itself “Into the artifice of
eternity.” In it, the Grecian urn does not succeed in celebrating art to the
exclusion of life, because, to Keats’s perspective, the celebration of art must be
hobbled by mortal life since it is dependent for its very terms and patterns
upon this mortal life. An “indescribable feud” and “most dizzy pain” accompa-
nies the poet’s viewing of the Elgin Marbles (sonnet, 10–16) precisely because
these marbles mingle permanent Grecian grandeur with the rude wastings of
old time, the pains of human life with the immortal aspirations of the artist,
mortal shadows with marble magnitudes. Slow time will erode the urn’s
beauty much as it has weathered the Elgin sculptures and the old sanctuary of
the fallen Titans. All three share the same reality because their species of
beauty, however formal, permanent, or transcendent, is derived from organic
beauty and finds meaning only through the passing phases and sacrificial
process of this beauty.

By default and by intention the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” reveals much of life
and organic sacrifice; it does so despite the purported message on the sup-
remacy of art of the Grecian urn—and perhaps because of it. Order and the
pleasing images of art are maintained by the urn and its sculptor through
willful ignorance and the refusal to verbalize what lies beyond or beneath
these images. What the poet imagines in stanza four of the ode of the heifer’s
impending sacrifice and the little town’s renunciation speaks specifically of
the fear, abandonment, and recurring destruction common to the scenes of
mortal life but missing from the surface of the urn. We recall a parallel scene
pictured directly through painting, instead of by implication as the absent
underside of a marble urn, in the verse-epistle to John Hamilton Reynolds:

The sacrifice goes on; the pontif knife
Gleams in the sun, the milk-white heifer lows,
The pipes go shrilly, the libation flows;
A white sail shews above the green-head cliff,
Moves round the point, and throws her anchor stiff.
(20–24)

The “Titian colours touch’d into real life” of the line preceding these become
the true colors of this sacrifice. Keats’s eye probes beneath the smooth sur-
face of Claude’s painting “Enchanted Castle” to discern signs of fear and
underlying disorder; he senses thereby sacrifice more real than that repre-
sented as ritual in another of Claude’s paintings, “Sacrifice to Apollo.” The
teeming life of the ocean reveals itself to his perception—at once that of poet,
naturalist, anatomist and physician—as "the sacrifice of generations," an un-ending sacrifice without ritual, a universal and unrelenting rapacity, an "eternal fierce destruction." The sacrifice to Apollo continues, after art as before, and the white sail that shows above the green-headed cliff recalls for us another myth of everlasting love born of real sacrifice and misinterpreted ritual. In the story of Tristan and Isolde the sign of healing, the white sails, is deliberately misinterpreted. Isolde arrives too late and lives; Tristan dies, poisoned and deceived; and the sacrifice of life and death goes on. The fate of these eternal lovers, no less than of those lovers in Alexander von Humboldt's myth of life, must shadow the lovers graven upon the Grecian urn and the exclusive art that transfixes them in their happiness.

The "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is all about life, mortal life that can draw even the immortality of Grecian art into its processes. The sculptor's attempt to use life to exalt art by contrast, and to show what art can accomplish with the forms of life even upon the simple surface of marble, becomes in the ode not so much a celebration as a profound reiteration of life and the "muddy lees" of reality. The urn's icy beauty of perfection (Beauty is Truth) finds more than its equal in life's cruel beauty of process. Its status as a "still unravish'd bride of quietness" includes an implicit vulnerability to ravishment in the future by an intensity greater than the quietude of its art. Its role as "foster-child of silence and slow time," meanwhile, is precarious and hardly privileged when the true progeny of these ponderous counters are the mortal generations of life.

The Grecian urn's achievement when cast in the sober light of Keats's ode must read as a consummate artistry that mimics but cannot capture life. The urn's very resolve to speak of art and say the least of life is suspect, a brave declaration of intention that must fail despite the achieved artistic perfection. The tragedy of the urn's perfection is that its static art presupposes life, defines itself in terms of life, masquerades the forms of life, feeds its false excitation upon the energy of life, and tells through its "flowery tale" a fable of chemical life no less true than that one of electric polarity and chemical affinity told by Alexander von Humboldt in 1795. The "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is Keats's informed contribution to the contemporary debate on the meaning of life. It is a masterful ellipsis of the philosophies of life of his time from a poet who could not deny for the sake of art what he had been trained to believe was the Romantic physician's first concern. The poem's argument constitutes a conscious and intense debate on the nature of vitality.

Its focus is the moment of animation—the very subject that inevitably preoccupied all participants in the debate on life—a stationless quickening of vitality that science had yet to apprehend, and that artifacts like the Grecian urn or the Elgin Marbles appeared to station, albeit fruitlessly. Through the process of Keats's subdued ode to life we are taught to read life as Romantic physicians, with the same questions and with the same eye to recognize for what they are the signs of the absence of life. Art is not life, and its perfection is not process. The question of life persists.