

**Timelessness and Time in
Keats's "Ode on Grecian Urn"**

**Hadi Saleh Sultan
Female Teachers Training Institute / Nineveh
Lecturer**

ABSTRACT

This study aims at shedding light on time and its relation to the world of John Keats's "Ode on Grecian Urn". It is divided into an introduction and two other sections. The introduction tackles time as a mysterious phenomenon which ceaselessly stirs man's activities to face it. It also presents kinds of time which are closely related to its motion and motionlessness. The second section is devoted to the study of timelessness in the ode where in more than an occasion time seems static and everything seems to be fixed and eternal. The third section deals with time where change is present. It also deals with the world of becoming where timelessness and time are mingled together in a way that gives a space to possible changes.

1- Introduction

Man lives in a space of a mysterious natural phenomenon called time which is in ceaseless motion. It affects man insofar as it deprives him of the sense of stability and puts him in a continuous state of change which ends with inevitable death. As a result of

man's ignorance of this phenomenon and his inability to face it, all cultures, from the dawn of civilization, tried to provide cognitive concepts concerning time to grant it a significant meaning. Some of these cultures look at it from a neutral point of view as time does not have any significant effect on man. Other cultures see that time is a creative factor which grants man a space for activity and creativity. A third system of culture has a negative point of view for it sees time as a power which threatens the continuity of life and turns man's achievements to nothingness a matter which makes life an absurd thing "signifying nothing".

Every culture expresses a view concerning time through creative activities such as philosophy, music, painting and literature where the last is the most outstanding activity among them. It reveals that man's attitude to time and his continuous attempts to transcend it for "the only escapes from time are provided by love and perhaps, by poetry"⁽¹⁾. The transcendence of time, however, is a dream which is deeply rooted in literature as it is present in Nietzsche's words "all desires yearn for eternity"⁽²⁾. Poets deal with time in a way which makes them transcend the signs of mortality. Hence to talk about time one is trying to protect himself⁽³⁾. They look for the eternal and what challenges time because eternity transcends time and time closes it⁽⁴⁾ as Joseph Campbell argues.

What complicates matters further is the meaning of time and its existence. In fact man can not comprehend the meaning of time,

but he can touch it through its effects; it cannot be defined⁽⁵⁾. Its existence on the other hand is conditioned by its effects among which is change for it has a semi continuous relation with the feeling of melancholy which is mostly a feeling of mortality in all its forms⁽⁶⁾. Another problem has been raised; now concerning change; F. H. Bradley argues, "Time is, like space, has most evidently proved not to be real, ... The problem of change defies solution"⁽⁷⁾. However, change is strongly associated with time. It appears in the form of novelty and creation. Bergson says for example that "When we are intuiting time we are intuiting novelty and creation"⁽⁸⁾. At any rate some philosophers and psychoanalysts divide time into two main types A-time and B-time where A-time is associated with temporal change and B-time with permanent time-relations. McTaggart, for example, "started the tradition of describing A-time as dynamic and B-time as static"⁽⁹⁾. The same idea is expressed by Richard Gale who said that:

In conceiving of A-time, we conceive of time in a dynamic or tensed ways as being the very quintessence of flux and transiency. In B – time, however, there is "a static structure", and events... are laid out of permanent order⁽¹⁰⁾.

Hence to tackle time in any literary work, one should take into account the motion and the motionlessness of time, i.e. time and timelessness in addition to the world of becoming which exists

in between. In Keats's "Ode on Grecian Urn", the idea is not planned for previously. In other words, the poet did not intend to write about time or timelessness. He was just inspired by the mystery of this phenomenon. Consequently, he, unconsciously, dealt with different aspects of time. On this Archibald Macleish argues that "a poem is not the perfected expression of a predetermined thought but is itself the process of its thinking moving from perception to perception, sense to sense..."⁽¹¹⁾. This fact complicates the matter of talking about time in this ode for it is a controversial subject and one should be alert about the place where to put his next step. However, this ode is not "the Hamlet among Keats's odes" because of its rich texture⁽¹²⁾ as Blackstone sees but because of the fusion among the different aspects of time.

1-1 Timelessness in the Ode

To talk about timelessness one should talk about eternity where time does not have an effect on man or about "Eden Paradise where there is no time; no birth, no death and no life as well, and to start from the time of mythical dream where there is no time and men and women do not know the differences among them and God and man are practically but one"⁽¹³⁾. In the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" time seems to be absent in some occasions or at least is transcended. Really the main purpose of the poet is to transcend time, a matter which can be touched in the first few lines of the ode which

Timelessness and Time in Keats's "Ode on Grecian Urn"

Hadi Saleh Sultan

represents the poet's triumph over mortality⁽¹⁴⁾. He tried to transcend the signs of mortality when he described the urn as "bride of quietness" and "foster – child of silence and slow time":

*Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster – child of silence and low time, (ll. 1-2)*

The thing which is fostered by time is far from the effect of change and motion which characterize time. The urn is addressed in its special relation with silence and time – a relationship which suggests a privileged treatment for it is not expected from the foster – parents to marry their own wards⁽¹⁵⁾. To remain with the special vocabulary Keats uses in order to show the motionlessness of time the word "still" comes to be the first which expresses both the poet's intention and draws the reader's awareness. It suggests a frozen moment where everything is fixed. Then he describes the urn as a "sylvan historian" where man had no sense of time in that dim era:

*Sylvan historian who cants thus express
a flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
(ll. 3-4)*

The negation which covers almost all the stanzas of the poem also participates in adding a sense of fixity and motionlessness. Everything is fixed and sometimes there are attempts but there is not a notable action that shows changes:

*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. (ll. 15-18).*

The young man cannot leave his song because he is fettered to it and because time is frozen in the present; it is an immortal present and the lover cannot reach his goal though he is whipped by a burning desire for the same reason. Then the poet consoles the lover for the time which cuts the continuity of man's expectations will never affect his attempt nor does it affect the beauty of the maid he chases:

*... yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
forever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (ll. 18-20)*

Nothing will change because the "urn "has not been subject to the assault of history"⁽¹⁶⁾. In the third stanza he expresses the fixity and motionlessness of time through negation and affirmation concerning the continuity of fixation and changelessness of the action carried out on the urn. The boughs cannot shed leaves nor can they desert spring, they are still staggering in between. The happy musicians are still piping songs forever:

Timelessness and Time in Keats's "Ode on Grecian Urn"
Hadi Saleh Sultan

*Ah, happy happy boughs! Thau cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu;
And happy melodist, unwearied,
Forever piping songs forever new; (ll. 21-24)*

In such a case, love can not be cooled nor can its desires be clamed down. Love is fixed on its suffering and passions, yet there is no fear of the future. Again the poem does not open its dimensions to the future and past. It is "still" presenting a frozen moment in present:

*More happy love! More happy, happy love!
Forever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
Forever panting and forever young:*

A burning forehead, and a parching tongue (ll. 25-30)

Everything is immortalized in that moment and frozen in time. In fact no painter has ever immortalized "one moment" more memorably than Keats did in the "Ode on Grecian Urn"⁽¹⁷⁾. The poet idealizes the urn and its immortality. He uproots it from historical reference and "places it in a zone of temporal eternal significance"⁽¹⁸⁾. He is stressing the unwearied charm of the scene in

a way that makes it defy time and deathless because what is portrayed is lifeless but showing gestures of life.

What makes the poet idealize immortality represented by the pictures on the urn is his own craving to defy time which ceaselessly drives him to his end and every moment reminds him of his short existence. Hence, the poet is alienated from himself and he identifies himself with the other in order to find himself again. Time, as Hegel maintains is "the necessary alienation, the environment where the subject realizes himself by losing himself, where he becomes other in order to become truly himself"⁽¹⁹⁾.

However, the continuity of the eternity of the present moment does not continue for in some other occasions Keats puts his reader on the knife edge where timelessness and time are moving together.

1-2 Time and Becoming in the Ode

Though the first reading of the poem blurs the reader from the movement of time, yet further close reading shows a slow motion of time. The urn which fostered by slow time may be affected by it as well, for "the slowness is probably due to focusing our attention on shorter intervals of physical time"⁽²⁰⁾. There may be a change in the future for there is a paradox between the urn which is enfolded by silence and quietness and the dynamic life portrayed on it. Hence, "on the literal level, the urn has existed in the physical

Timelessness and Time in Keats's "Ode on Grecian Urn"

Hadi Saleh Sultan

world, in which all things are mutable, and so is related to one aspect of time⁽²¹⁾. The word "grieve" in the line where the poet addresses the lover:

Though winning near the goal – yet, do not grieve; (l. 18)

has an indirect relationship with the motion of time for "wherever there is time, there would be grief"⁽²²⁾. However, the presence of time shows itself clearly both structurally and grammatically in the poem as the poet tends to end it. The fourth stanza presents many successive questions as the first stanza does. This structural technique has a highly philosophical function as the return to questions representing a return to the time the poet starts from. Hence, there is a motion whatever its forms maybe. There is a cyclic time which is seen "as a circle forever turning on itself, repeating itself to infinity"⁽²³⁾. In these questions there is a clear hint of motion from past to present as he inquires about the "little town" which is empty:

*What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain – built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of its folk, this pious morn? (ll. 35-37)*

Now the poem opens to the past where the town was supposed to be inhabited by people who have recently descended to the "green altar", where the "heifer" will be sacrificed. This

openness to the past will be extended to the future in the last stanza where the modal "shall" twice expresses it.

*When old age shall this generation waste
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe (ll. 46-47)*

When the poet recognizes the fragility of his existence, the motion of time comes to be faster and faster and it opens to the future when the poet dies and the urn remains.

As a result of the poet's movement towards himself and as he cuts the line of identification with the urn he names it and he knows, now, its real identity. He also knows that what is portrayed is but lifeless figures:

*O Attic shape! Fair attitude! With brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought, (ll. 41-42)*

Then he describes it as "a friend to man" which means it shares his fate sooner or later; they are both doomed by mortality:

*..... a friend to man to whom thou say'st,
Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know (ll. 48-50)*

In addition to being a friend to man, the urn speaks and utters wisdoms. Again it becomes close to the world of mortality brought about by time.

Timelessness and Time in Keats's "Ode on Grecian Urn"

Hadi Saleh Sultan

To start commenting on the world of becoming one should take "slow time" and the phrase "still unravished" into a considerable account. These phrases make the urn belong to both becoming and immutability. The urn approaches this state for the slow time may accelerate in the future and the "still unravished" carries with it "the threat that it eventually may be ravished, and since it is related to slow time rather than to no – time"⁽²⁴⁾. Hence, the urn, is already thrown into the realm of the possibilities the future carries. The image of the maidens portrayed on the urn helps to put the urn in the world of becoming. Despite the fact that their chastity relates them to the world of changeless being, they "seem about to be despoiled this very moment by the generative act symbolizes the world of becoming; because they are mortal, mutability and decay are their principles"⁽²⁵⁾:

..... *What maidens loth?*
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (ll. 8-10)

The slowness and softness by which the first stanza begins, accelerate rapidly and become short excited successive questions which soon lead to the climax represented by "wild ecstasy".

In fact, "Keats's purpose is divided: he wants to bring the figures to life and yet to keep them free of existential impurities, to use them as alternatives to the life he knows"⁽²⁶⁾.

Another occasion of the poem which mingles the mortal with the divine or immortal, and the dynamic with the static is the question where the poet cannot distinguish between men and gods:

What men or gods are these? (l. 8)

The mortal and the divine are moving together in the same context where a new space for the world of change and becoming is alluded to.

Conclusion

Among the best literary works that deal with time is Keats's "Ode on Grecian Urn". It is as mysterious as the concept it tackles. It moves between the world of timelessness and time where the world of becoming - sometimes – compromises between them. Motionlessness generates motion through some certain words or phrases which sometimes mingle the world of becoming as well. The movement between the world of timelessness and time is due to the poet's staggering point of view between immortality which he dreams of and the mortality by which he is doomed by. As a result he glorifies the moments where time "fosters" the urn and where change has no path to it and is alienated from himself and identified with the urn. Other times he finds no way to escape mortality forever. Hence, he alludes to the possibility and to becoming as inevitable characteristics of time.

Notes

1. www. "What is Time", [URL:http://time.2006.p.3](http://time.2006.p.3).
2. www. "What is Time", p. 3.
3. Gaston Bashler, Jadaliat Azzaman, Trans: Khalid Ahmed Khalil, (Diwan Al-Mutbuat Al-Jami'a, 1979), p. 46.
4. Joseph Kambell, Kowwat Al-Ustura, Trans: Hassan Sakir (Dar Al-Kalima, Syria, 1999), p. 310.
5. - - - - - Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, Edited by, James Hastings, Vol. XII, (New York, 1967), p. 334.
6. Bashler, p. 59.
7. www. The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, [URL:http://time.2008.p.11of53](http://time.2008.p.11of53).
8. www. Clifford William, "A Bergsonian Approach to A, and B – Time", [URL:http://time.2009.p.3of21](http://time.2009.p.3of21).
9. J. M. E. McTaggart, J. M. E. McTaggart, The Nature of Existence, Vol. II, (Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 92.
10. Richard Gale, The Philosophy of Time, (Grand City, New York: Doubleday Co., 1967), p. 66.
11. Archibald Macleish, Poetry and Experience, (England, Penguin Books, 1960), p. 168.
12. Bernard Blackstone, The Consecrated Urn, (London, Longman, 1966), p. 329.
13. Kambell, p. 76 – 77.

14. www. John Kandl, "Ode on Grecian Urn",
[URL:http://ode.2007.p.3of8](http://ode.2007.p.3of8).
15. - - - - - Notes of Keats's Poetry, (Canada, Closes Publishing
Company Limited, 1967), p. 73.
16. Morris Dickstein, Keats and His Poetry: A study in
Development, (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press,
1971), p. 223.
17. Ian Jack, Keats and the Mirror of Art, (Oxford, the
Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 224.
18. Kandl, p. 1 of 11.
19. www. "What is Time", p. 20.
20. www. The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, p. 6 of 53.
21. Walter Jackson Bate, Ed., Keats: A Collection of Critical
Essays, "The Ode on Grecian Urn", Earl Wasserman, (New
Jersey, England Cliffs, 1964), p. 115.
22. Kambell, p. 310.
23. www. What is Time, p. 9.
24. Bate, p. 115.
25. Bate, p. 116.
26. Dickstein, p. 224.

Bibliography

- Bashler, Gaston, Jadaliat Azzaman, Trans: Khalid Ahmed Khalil, Diwan Al-Mutbuat Al-Jami'a, 1979.
- Bate, Walter Jackson Ed., Keats: A Collection of Critical Essays, "The Ode on Grecian Urn", Earl Wasserman, New Jersey, England Cliffs, 1964.
- Blackstone, Bernard, The Consecrated Urn, London, Longman, 1966.
- Dickstein, Morris, Keats and His Poetry: A study in Development, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1971.
- - - - - Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, Edited by, James Hastings, Vol. XII, New York, 1967.
- Gale, Richard, The Philosophy of Time, Grand City, New York: Doubleday Co., 1967.
- Jack, Ian, Keats and the Mirror of Art, Oxford, the Clarendon Press, 1967.
- Kambell, Joseph, Kowwat Al-Ustura, Trans: Hassan Sakir. Dar Al-Kalima, Syria, 1999.
- Macleish, Archibald, Poetry and Experience, "The Arable World", England, Penguin Books, 1960.
- McTaggart, J. M. E., The Nature of Existence, Vol. II, Cambridge University Press, 1976.

- - - - - Notes of Keats's Poetry, Canada, Closes Publishing Company Limited, 1967.
- Poetical Works of John Keats, H.W. Garrod, (ed.), London, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1958.
- www. Kandl, John, "Ode on Grecian Urn", [URL:http://ode.2007](http://ode.2007).
- www. The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, [URL:http://time.2008](http://time.2008).
- www. "What is Time", [URL:http//time.2006](http://time.2006).
- www. William, Clifford, "A Bergsonian Approach to A, and B – Time", [URL:http://time.2009](http://time.2009).