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"Ode on a Grecian Urn": Hypercanonicity & Pedagogy

Keats's Widely-Taught and Well-Wrought "Urn"

This volume of *Romantic Circles Praxis Series* includes an editor's introduction by James O'Rourke, essays by David Collings, Helen Regueiro Elam, Spencer Hall, David P. Haney, John Kandl, Bridget Keegan, Brennan O'Donnell, Jeffrey C. Robinson, Jack Stillinger, Heidi Thomson and Susan J. Wolfson.

This volume on the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is part of the Romantic Circles Praxis series on seminal texts in Romantic literature. The eleven contributors were asked not for original scholarship on the "Urn," but for an account of how they teach this hypercanonic text. If it can be assumed that every English major knows something about this poem, this volume tries to identify what it is that they know. These eleven essays suggest that students are confronting the enigmas of Keats's poem just as he contemplated the enigmas of the silent urn, and they show that there is rich variety of methods for bringing students to an appreciation of Keats's uncertainties, mysteries and doubts.

The text of this volume is encoded in HTML, but features no frames and a limited use of tables. It will work best with Netscape 4.0 or Internet Explorer 4.0 or higher or a comparable browser; earlier browsers may not display everything properly. Because you may enter and exit these files along multiple paths, you may need to use the back-arrow button on your browser to return to your starting point. The full text of the volume, like all hypertexts in the *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*, is fully searchable.

The essays and other files were marked up in HTML by Kate Singer at the University of Maryland. The volume cover and contents page were also designed and marked up by Kate Singer.

About the Romantic Circles Praxis Series

The **Romantic Circles Praxis Series** is devoted to using computer technologies for the contemporary critical investigation of the languages, cultures, histories, and theories of Romanticism. Tracking the circulation of Romanticism within these interrelated domains of knowledge, **RCPS** recognizes as its conceptual terrain a world where Romanticism has, on the one hand, dissolved as a period and an idea into a plurality of discourses and, on the other, retained a vigorous, recognizable hold on the intellectual and theoretical discussions of today. **RCPS** is committed to mapping out this terrain with the best and most exciting critical writing of contemporary Romanticist scholarship. The **Romantic Circles Praxis Series** was formerly known as **Romantic Praxis: Theory and Criticism**. The name was changed in November 1999.

About the Contributors

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Spencer Hall is Professor of English and Director of Honors at Rhode Island College. He has edited the MLA Approaches to Teaching volumes on Wordsworth (with Jonathan Ramsey) and Percy Shelley and has published numerous articles and reviews on Romantic poetry and criticism.

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John Kandi is Professor of English and Director of the Honors Program at Walsh University. He has published several articles on Keats and Romanticism, including chapter one of *The Cambridge Companion to Keats* entitled, "'Delight with Liberty': The Politics of Keats's Early Poetry." He is currently finishing an edition of *Keats's Selected Poems: Including the Complete 1817 and 1820 Volumes, with Selections from Endymion* for Broadview Press.

Bridget Keegan is Associate Professor and Chair of English at Creighton University in Omaha, NE. She is one of the editors of *English Laboring-Class Poetry, 1700-1800* (Pickering and Chatto, 2002) and has written articles on John Clare and on laboring-class poetry. She is currently finishing a monograph on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century laboring-class writing about nature.

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James O'Rourke is Professor of English at Florida State University. He is the author of *Keats's Odes and Contemporary Criticism* (Florida, 1998) and articles on Mary Shelley, Wordsworth, and Shakespeare. He is currently writing on ethics and autobiography.

Jeffrey C. Robinson's most recent book of criticism is *Reception and Poetics in Keats: My Ended Poet* (Macmillan/St. Martins, 1998). He is finishing a book on the Fancy, or Romantic counter-poetics and a book on poetry and journal entries on the poetry of Wordsworth. He teaches at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

Jack Stillinger, Center for Advanced Study Professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, published on "Ode on a Grecian Urn" as long ago as 1958, in a short piece in PMLA on the manuscripts of the poem, and as recently as 2001, in a piece titled "The 'Story' of Keats" in Susan Wolfson's *Cambridge Companion to Keats*. His latest book is *Reading "The Eve of St. Agnes": The Multiples of Complex Literary Transaction* (Oxford UP, 1999).

Heidi Thomson is Senior Lecturer in English at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. She has edited *The Absentee* for Penguin Classics (2000). Together with Kim Walker she has edited Volume Five of *Edgeworth's Tales* for the Pickering Masters edition (1999). She has published articles and reviews in the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, *Studies in Romanticism*, *Yearbook of English Studies*, *Modern Language Review*, and *Criticism*. She particularly enjoys teaching, reading and thinking about the lyric poetry of Gray, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats.

Susan J. Wolfson is Professor of English at Princeton University and the author of *The Questioning Presence* (1986) and *Formal Charges* (1997), both of which involve Keats. She is also editor of and contributor to *The Cambridge Companion to John Keats* (2001), the editor of the *The Romantics and their Contemporaries* in *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, Volume 2a, 2nd ed. (2003) as well as editor of the forthcoming *John Keats: A Longman Cultural Edition* (2004).

"Ode on a Grecian Urn": Hypercanonicity & Pedagogy

Introduction

James O'Rourke, Florida State University

1. This volume on the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is part of the Romantic Circles Praxis series on seminal texts in Romantic literature. When I was asked to edit a volume of essays on the "Urn," I decided that instead of looking for original scholarship on the poem, it would be more useful to inquire into the present pedagogic state of this hypercanonic text. As I put it to the prospective contributors to the volume: Every English major knows something about this poem, but what is it that they know?
2. If the eleven essays in this volume are representative, it seems that there is a surprising consistency to what students are learning about Keats's "Urn." In classrooms across the US, and in at least one classroom in New Zealand, they are hearing that this poem is about questions, and not about answers. They are being asked to look for the dominant punctuation mark in the poem, and to consider why the question mark recurs so frequently; they are hearing about negative capability as the cultivation of uncertainty; and they are contemplating the enigmas of Keats's poem as an analogue for the urn that so perplexed and intrigued him.
3. In sending out the request for contributions to this volume, I suggested a few general questions that respondents might consider: What sort of balance do you strike in the classroom between formalist close reading and historical contextualization? Do you teach the poem differently in classes set at different levels? Does the poem's concern with "beauty" and "truth" resonate with twenty-first century American college students? I asked contributors to focus their remarks on how they talk about this poem to the nonprofessional audience of our students, and not about what they would like to say to an audience of their peers.
4. I may have put the first question a bit too polemically. When I asked whether "we replicate the problem that is often raised in other periods of early modern studies, where scholars confess that while they are New Historicists in their research, they often fall back into formalist New Criticism in the classroom," this phrasing suggested to at least one contributor that I was equating formalism with "bad faith." I saw the question as more of a practical and logistical one. While it is pretty much a demand of scholarly research that a critical analysis of a literary text be accompanied by the placement of the work within a coherent cultural context, and there is a high degree of expectation that a new essay on a work as familiar as Keats's "Urn" should offer some important new raw material about the poem's origin, teaching the poem requires that we figure out how to get that material into the classroom, and how to make sure that its inclusion sharpens the focus on the literary text.
5. What was most striking about these essays, on the whole, is the energy with which the contributors attacked these questions. We are all too familiar with the endlessly repeated charge from the cultural right that college professors are no longer interested in teaching, and with the refined versions of that charge: that we are only interested in teaching our own specialized research, and that we no longer care to teach the "great books." We know this is propaganda, but we hear it so often that we may begin to believe that it is only an exaggeration, and not an inversion of reality.
6. The essays here suggest that the canon, and American college students, have never been in better or more solicitous hands. The contributors to this volume detail the close attention they pay to the text and

to their students, varying both the amount of contextual material brought into the classroom and the style of close reading according to the class level. While upper-division and graduate courses generally offer more of an opportunity to explore the cultural context of the poem, there is a recurrent stress on not allowing the poem to get lost in that context.

7. The primary challenge of teaching the "Urn" seems to be, at every level, to find a way of conveying the poem's resistance to being reduced to a consumable meaning or a predictable narrative. Students sometimes arrive at college believing, as one contributor put it, that "We did this poem in high school." Nonprofessional readers want to believe that once a text has been solved, like an algebraic equation, one needs only to remember the formula in order to reiterate the answer. This problem can be replicated at higher levels when the ability to provide a rich cultural context for the poem can offer the temptation to make the poem fully explicable through that context. The resistance to this semiotic desire emerges in the ways that various contributors work to make the daily lives of their classrooms as unpredictable as possible. Some of the contributions suggest that the longer one is at this, the more radical one's methods become.
8. Our contributors suggest that many students do, eventually, appreciate the idea that Keats's "beauty" and "truth" are neither ideological effects nor transcendent truths, but markers of a strange, elusive desire. In the best of cases, they discover that desire within themselves, and they recognize its difference from the simpler, utilitarian desires of their everyday lives. If any of our students' parents (or our deans) are alarmed by media claims that professors no longer care about teaching, they need only look at the evident fervor with which this random sample of professors has approached what might look like the most routine pedagogical exercise—"How do you teach the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn?'"—in order to be reassured that their children's education is being treated with a good deal more seriousness than they ever imagined.
9. When I asked the contributors to this volume to focus on how they taught the poem, I suggested that citations should be kept to a minimum, and that familiar texts needed no citation. Some contributors have included lists of Works Cited with their essays, while others have not. I have added a composite list of Works Cited for the entire volume.

"Ode on a Grecian Urn": Hypercanonicity & Pedagogy

Suspended Satisfaction: "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and the Construction of Art

David Collings, Bowdoin College

1. Those of us who teach early nineteenth-century British literature to undergraduates have much to ponder as we approach Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." How much should we emphasize close reading and usher our students into the presence of the well-wrought urn, whether in a consecrating or deconstructive spirit? How much should we take up a variety of other contexts, such as the genres of the ode or the romantic lyric, the reflection on romantic Hellenism, the place of Keats in a museum-going public, the poet's reflections on the distinctiveness of aesthetic value, or the place of the ode within his highly self-conscious poetic career? Ideally, one should be able to invite students into the poem as a carefully wrought artifact while also making it clear that writing poetry that demands such close reading represents a literary strategy of interest in its own right. To that end, in recent years I have taught Keats in a course on the literature and culture of the Regency period, alongside such authors as Byron, Austen, Scott, Hazlitt, Cobbett, and Clare. By the time students read Keats, they are already aware that the period sustained a wide array of literary practices, each performing a specific strategy in relation to the performance of social rank, the display of cultural capital, and the construction of emergent reading audiences. Thus while students are drawn into Keats's aesthetic, so congruent it seems with their own, they remain at least dimly aware that it emanates from his specific social position as an aspiring "cockney" poet.
2. To emphasize the cultural overtones of Keats's characteristic themes, on a day preceding our discussion of the ode I assign a portion of Colin Campbell's *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*. Campbell argues that modern consumerism creates a distinctive form of desire: the day-dream, in which one imagines a plausible future pleasure that would arise from purchasing or consuming a particular commodity. Such a day-dream is not satisfied by the commodity itself, which can never quite match the imagined pleasure it is meant to bring. The consumer thus perpetually longs for something beyond the reach of any real satisfaction. But Campbell goes on to argue that the result is not frustration, but rather a pleasure one takes in day-dreaming itself; the deferral of satisfaction makes possible a hedonistic delight one takes in a purely imagined satisfaction. Furthermore, day-dreaming alters the status of commodities; rather than fulfilling a prior longing, "many of the cultural products offered for sale in modern societies are in fact consumed because they serve as aids to the construction of day-dreams" (92). Such commodities differ little from advertising images, films, novels, or other representations; all encourage the consumer to construct and constantly revise an "as-if world" to inhabit" (93).
3. Campbell's theory of consumerism provides a useful framework for our discussion of the theme of dreaming in portions of *Endymion*, the catalog of artifacts in "Sleep and Poetry," the central problems of "The Eve of St. Agnes," the suburban setting for the odes, and Keats's position more generally as a partially educated Londoner aspiring to a position of literary prominence. The close match between Campbell's argument and Keats's characteristic themes enables students to locate Keats's poetry within a world of consumption and desire familiar to them and to recognize the serious social concerns embedded in Keatsian lyricism. This approach gains special force when we begin our discussion of "The Eve of St. Agnes," whose themes take on a vivid new dimension in light of Campbell's argument.

Why do the couple never eat from the table of dainties? Why should Madeline prefer her dream over consummation? What exactly happens to the lovers in the key moment when Porphyro invades her dream? Why does the poem represent its own ornate literariness in the gorgeous aesthetic displays it describes, as if to suggest that it resembles the ornate window before which Madeline prays? Is it to be consumed as an object of pleasure, or simply viewed adoringly, in its iconic splendor, transforming the reader into a ravished spectator? What is poetry's status in a world shaped in part by the pleasure of anticipation?

4. Such a discussion prepares students for the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," where Keats takes up similar questions, apparently suggesting that unheard music and unconsummated desire is preferable. Here he embraces what Campbell calls day-dreaming, finding pleasure in the endless moment of imagined satisfaction rather than in satisfaction itself. But in that case, the urn becomes a magnificent provocation, an exemplary representation, which takes us beyond any possible satisfaction into a virtual space of erotic plenitude beyond the body, suspending its use value entirely in favor of the viewer's construction of an imagined bliss.
5. But the opening stanza immediately complicates this reading. The poem suspends knowledge as well: Who are these men and gods? Where are they? What does their depicted activity signify? The questions never find an answer; the problem of significance is suspended as ruthlessly as the demand for erotic satisfaction. The poem thus introduces another thematic, at once parallel to consumer desire and distinct from it: the suspension of particular meaning, historical reference, or mythic import. The urn can defer satisfaction precisely because it emerges from an aesthetic domain without specific content. It solicits, but does not answer, our inquiries; it excites us to knowledge, but withholds what it promises. An exemplary teacher of Negative Capability (a concept one can hardly resist teaching in conjunction with this poem), the urn is also the incarnation of Art, of aesthetic value determined not by its social location but by its power to dissolve all such determinations.
6. In the second and third stanzas, the poem draws attention to this aspect of the urn by drawing attention to the frozen temporality of its images. Here the structure of consumer desire is not only provoked by the urn but also depicted in its own images of suspended animation: the figures on its surface desire without consummation, much as one listens to its soft pipes though one cannot hear them. This link between erotic suspension and the plastic arts changes both. For one thing, this parallel transforms the temporal stasis of the image into an allegory of deferred satisfaction; the aesthetic category of the image begins to represent not so much a specific aesthetic mode among others but a form of desire that prefers anticipation to consummation. Here art has become an allegory for daydreaming. Yet for this very reason, the urn is not simply a commodity among others, for by waiving all answers regarding its significance, it also waives its claim to satisfy our desire. Rather than offering itself up for sale, only to be replaced by another commodity, the urn interrupts the logic of economic exchange and represents the structure of commodity desire itself, imaging Campbell's argument, as it were, in the youth who forever draws near the goal. It is as if the urn stands in for that absent object for which the consumer ever seeks and which must remain absent for desire to renew itself, and does so precisely because it empties itself out and, like the youth's goal, remains forever out of reach. As a result, the urn pushes beyond the logic of consumer desire: where the consumer can at least hope for an imagined consummation from a given commodity, the urn makes that satisfaction impossible and emphasizes the paradoxical bliss one takes in an anticipation that is never fulfilled. The purest form of consumer desire takes one beyond the commodity into the aesthetic artifact per se, from exchange or consummation into Art.
7. But how does Art escape the logic of the commodity? Here it is useful to tell students that Keats was probably inspired to write this poem after visiting the British Museum and seeing Greek artifacts there.

While the urn is an object among others, an artifact with its own material and cultural history, it does not address the viewer in the same way as an object in a shop window. The context of the museum suspends it from commodity exchange, just as the immense temporal distance between it and the viewer takes it forever outside the context of everyday use. The passage of time—not to mention the overvaluation of all things Greek—has consecrated this object. It seems that the artifact, simply by enduring so long, has managed to suspend its ordinary relation to "slow time" and has gained the power to address us on behalf of eternity itself; it has become a sublime object, that elusive thing desiring subjects seek but necessarily fail to grasp. Thus the poem articulates what one might call the ideology of the museum, seeing the latter not as a specific cultural institution but as the repository of objects of transcendental value. As an institution, the museum separates objects we are to regard as culturally significant from the everyday objects outside its walls; its task is to open up a space of permanent significance, to cut objects off from their ordinary historical location and give them a place within a story or schema of absolute value. The poem participates in this task in its final two stanzas, where it first emphasizes the urn's evacuation of a presumed historical community, depicted as an abandoned village, and then places it in that zone of eternal significance, causing it to address the community of all the mortal generations who can receive its message.

8. The final stanza's reference to the wasting of generations brings us back to the problem of embodiment, previously broached in the lines on erotic consummation. The urn can embody suspended satisfaction precisely because, as an artifact, it can endure much longer than human bodies can. Its privilege derives from its power to suspend desire more radically than any desiring subject can ever do. It is radically other to any human being, any generation, any historical moment, and, as the first stanza suggests, to any particular knowledge. Thus the notorious final lines tell us that truth is found in whatever suspends knowledge: the urn's message is its power to tease us out of thought. These final lines constitute a critique and manifesto in the same gesture, showing that the urn has no wisdom to offer and yet celebrating its austere sublimity. The urn survives through time to tell us nothing at all, yet the absence of any message is more enduring than any historically located insight. The urn speaks not for a lived eternity, for a subject who has entered into bliss, but rather for a technique of suspending temporal succession; the eternity we find there is only one we attribute to it, one we posit in order to countenance our own place in a sequence of dying generations. If the urn is thus the product of an aesthetic sleight of hand, it does not promise refuge from time except in our own power to project eternity onto it and then hear its message reflected back into our own historical present. In that way, Art makes eternity available to the dying generations through their power to take pleasure in a longing whose fulfillment is itself.
9. In the remaining days of our discussion of Keats, as we take up the later odes, *Lamia*, *The Fall of Hyperion*, and "To Autumn," the students and I have many opportunities to complicate this reading of the poem. I have found that even when I try to push beyond the above reading, students remember mostly what I have outlined above, and thus that it is better to complicate the poem retrospectively, when they can see Keats apparently reconsidering the stance he takes there. In recent years, students have been especially interested in rethinking the ode once they encounter the ravaged face of Moneta or read of the speaker's horror at having to endure the temporal stasis of the fallen Saturn. By finding new levels to this poem in retrospect, primarily by seeing in it anticipations of Keats's later and apparently more de-idealizing insights, students see the ode less as a finished text than one in a series of complex statements that approach certain themes in differing ways. When they see how often Keats inverts the poem, opens it back up, or plunders it, they begin to grasp it as part of the difficult process of cultural reading that we share with him. Rather than a well-wrought urn or an equally well-wrought deconstruction of any such figure, the poem thus becomes an open-ended text, at once subverting and reinforcing its hypercanonic status through the mobility of its claims.

Works Cited

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"Ode on a Grecian Urn": Hypercanonicity & Pedagogy

Teaching Like An Urn

Bridget Keegan, Creighton University

1. During my senior year in college, my best friend was interviewed for a Mellon Fellowship. It was the mid-eighties, and we were Comparative Literature concentrators, drunk with French post-structuralism and hungry for the next big wave in high theory. During my friend's interview, a Famous Harvard English Professor asked her, "How would you begin to teach Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' to first-year undergraduates?" My friend launched upon a lengthy disquisition surveying the various approaches that she might take to expose the poem's aporias, to tease out its unresolved ironies and to confront its deceptive use of prosopopoeia. The Famous Harvard Professor listened patiently. When my friend concluded her rigorous and sophisticated response, she expectantly asked Famous Harvard Professor what she thought of such an approach, and whether that was the answer she was looking for. Famous Harvard Professor replied, "Well, all I really hoped you would say was that you would begin by reading the poem aloud."
2. I share this anecdote for several reasons, not the least important of which is that it calls us back to remember the sheer musical beauty of Keats's language, the luscious sensuousness of Keats's words. This is something of which every class needs to be reminded (and of which most students, whose experience of poetry is silent and textual, are likely to be ignorant). But it also reminds us that students frequently think that literary analysis requires taking a "simple" question and returning a "complex" answer. They imagine (and often with good reason) that such "complexity" is "what we want" as teachers. I would argue, however, that many good teachers are not so much concerned with answers, really, but with questions. For me, and especially with first-year students, encouraging the act of questioning and helping students to formulate meaningful questions are my primary pedagogical objectives. This is especially true when we work with a hypercanonical text, such as "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Such texts, in general, are hypercanonical precisely because they are resistant to any definitive final interpretive answers. This text, in particular, is famously resistant. But it is also a poem that is all about how the questions, rather than the answers, are the most important part of our encounter with an aesthetic object.
3. The rhetorical act of questioning, and the pedagogical strategy of privileging questions over answers, inform how I teach the ode, largely because of the context in which I teach it. I regularly teach the poem to first-year students in my university's required World Literature survey. It is a course that isn't built to achieve any level of "depth," and which serves a student population with little background in literary history or theory and a good deal of resistance to being forced to study literature at all—and poetry in particular. We usually have only one class session to discuss the poem (in a four class sequence on European Romanticism). Because most of the students at my university are there to get degrees in the sciences or the health professions, they do not feel terribly eager or empowered to study literature. Many talk about reading poetry as if it were something written in a secret code to which no one ever bothered to give them the key. The students are also generally hard-working and ambitious for high grades. Thus, in the literature classroom, they want to be told what a text means and what they have to know about it so that they can transcribe that information on their test and get an A. They want answers, but that is only because they have been taught that having the answers is what matters most for their GPA. My purpose in teaching the poem, then, is to begin to readjust their intellectual value

system to see the equal importance of questions and questioning. "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a perfect text for such an objective.

4. I don't delude myself that my methods are original or theoretically sophisticated, and I guess, to a certain extent, they are "new critical." I try to have students pay attention to textual details and read the poem closely. Because of the structure of the course in which I teach the poem, I don't teach the poem with much historical or biographical context. While I assign students to read the biographical blurb introducing Keats in the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, I tend not to make too much of it. To the extent, however, that I don't attempt to resolve the ambiguous questions that the poem poses, I could say that I resist new critical techniques and tendencies. I don't ever untangle the ambiguities the poem sets forth for the students, and I use the poem metapoetically, as a way of teaching about reading poetry and responding to art in general. As such, albeit in an unsophisticated way, I draw from the deconstructive methods that I learned in my own college classes.
5. If there is any critic who has influenced my understanding of the poem, and best helped me to teach it to my first-year students, it is Susan Wolfson. In *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry*, Wolfson identifies the interrogative mode as an essential dimension of Keats's style and describes Keats's contribution to "the fundamentally interrogative character of the major poems of Romanticism. These poems are critically implicated in perceptions that provoke inquiry, experiences that elude or thwart stable organization, events that challenge previous certainties and require new terms of interpretation" (18). Reading Romantic poems, then, is a way to help students reframe their experience of poetry in particular, and knowledge in general.
6. When I teach the poem in the third week of the semester, I am primarily concerned with how the questions we pose to our students, and the ways in which we help students to pose their own questions, may be more important than the kinds of answers we might try to teach them about literary theory or literary history. If I can teach them to feel comfortable and confident asking questions on their own, then there's a greater likelihood that they will continue to read poetry, and take pleasure in reading poetry, even if it means, to quote Keats's famous letter, "being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (43).
7. I usually start the class, then, by having the students read the poem aloud (mindful of the advice of Famous Harvard English Professor). Then I ask, much to their surprise, if they notice anything unique about the poem's punctuation, and whether there is any punctuation mark that seems to recur. There's usually silence because they imagine that my simple question must be a trap, as it is far easier than the typical "English teacher" question. But then a brave soul will state the obvious. This allows me to remind them that in a lyric poem, an author has to deal with more limited space (or "length requirements") and thus needs to choose every word and even every mark of punctuation with great care.
8. But then I ask the students why Keats would have so many question marks in the poem. I ask them what his questions are about. I ask them whether the questions seem to have anything in common. I ask them, finally, to whom Keats is asking all of these questions, and, what that might mean for his actually getting any answers. I then ask perhaps the most troubling question, which is, why ask questions when you know you cannot, at least at a literal level, get an answer? Why bother? What's the point? (This last question is the one that non-English majors always seem to ask about the study of literature). I am careful in this whole process never to answer my own questions or to acknowledge any of the students' responses as "correct" or "incorrect." Whether the class notices this, and how soon they notice, varies from semester to semester.
9. However, students catch on pretty quickly that the speaker in the poem mirrors their own quandary in

approaching "remote" and "difficult" works of art. Once they can identify with the speaker, they can also use his questions to help think through their own. As Wolfson describes, "over the course of the ode, Keats turns the activity of his verse into a dilemma for the reader fully analogous to the speaker's dilemma of interpretation before the urn. By the conclusion of the ode, in fact, we may have the uneasy feeling not only that these dilemmas have converged but that they may even have reversed, for Keats's speaker abandons us with an ambiguously toned 'that is all' just before becoming as silent as the urn itself" (319-20).

10. By emphasizing the interrogative over the declarative in the course of our reading the poem slowly and carefully together in class, by the time we get to the famous final lines, the students feel comfortable really probing the "answer" that it purports to give. If class has gone well, the students are now suspicious of the "answer" of the last lines, which, as Wolfson notes, "has the sound of wisdom, but its import is very much qualified by its emergence from a context in which what we know and how we know are subjects of questioning rather than the substance of answers. The more one teases this summary assurance, the more one hears a tone that unsettles its performance of meaning" (327). By the end of class, I hope that I have helped students to better "hear" that unsettling tone, and no longer reach so irritably after facts and reason.
11. To be sure, any number of other Romantic poems might demonstrate the interrogative quality of poetry and help model the vital, creative, intellectual importance of questioning. Blake's "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" come immediately to mind. But in so far as Keats's ode asks questions specifically about a work of art, and in so far as Keats is using those questions to get at even greater mysteries like eternity and truth and beauty (ideas about which there are a lot of answers but no final ones), the ode is a very good teaching text. This is not because of the answers that it gives, but, again, for modeling the importance and the urgency of the act of persistent questioning. Wolfson sums this up quite eloquently, linking this feature with Keats's musicality: "The urn befriends its readers the way Keats's rhyme does —by encouraging our imaginative activity in a perpetual fixing and unfixing of what we think we know. We come to value its artistry not so much by what it yields to thought as by what it does to thought, provoking questions and refusing to confirm any sure points and resting places for our reasonings" (325-6). The poem demonstrates for students a point I go on to stress during the remainder of the semester: that literature, and especially poetry, is really a way to try to ask questions about things that there may, ultimately, be no answers for.
12. By teaching the poem early in the semester, I hope to help the students to become better questioners, and thus help shape their ability and openness to reading a diverse variety of "strange" texts from a variety of "foreign" or "remote" cultures, texts about which they are unlikely to find definitive answers but will enjoy much more if they are comfortable and confident asking questions. In the end, my teaching of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is motivated by a refusal to give answers, and a desire to teach the value of unanswered questions. I aspire to teach like the urn itself, forcing questions but never dispensing final answers. I work to frustrate students into challenging the conventions of questioning that operate toward the teleology of the answer. The ode is a perfect text for those purposes, and what's more, it ultimately allows me to make transparent to my students my motives in being so "mysterious." As Wolfson writes, "The play of questions with which the ode begins culminates in a linguistic limit that is both a parody of critical processes and a cunning expansion of mystery beyond the bourn of words" (327-8).
13. By the way, my friend didn't win that Mellon Fellowship. I think, however, that like me, she must have learned some good lessons from the interview, as today she is a tenured professor at a major public research university, and has just been awarded a university-level prize for excellence in teaching.

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"Ode on a Grecian Urn": Hypercanonicity & Pedagogy

Remembering to Die

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1. Far too much has been said, in relation to Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," about its invocation of aesthetic transcendence, culminating in the last two lines' identification of beauty and truth. I begin, therefore, with Nabokov's refutation of that entanglement in his reading of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*: "Beauty plus pity—that is the closest we can get to a definition of art. Where there is beauty there is pity for the simple reason that beauty must die: beauty always dies, the manner dies with the matter, the world dies with the individual" (*Lectures on Literature*, 251).
2. Keats knew this with a sense so profound that his "Grecian Urn" stands as an anomaly, or a compromise, and certainly a surprise. "She lives in beauty—Beauty that must die"—the mournful gnats of "To Autumn"—the opening of "Endymion"—and the last poem Keats wrote—"This living hand"—all point to his insistence not only on mortality but on poetry arising out of a direct and violent confrontation with it. "This living hand" is a stunning tour de force in this respect, because it forces upon those who survive—including and most especially the reader—the guilt that attaches to the living breath with which one reads and traces the poem.
3. The "Grecian Urn" appears to be a reaction to these meditations, or an escape from them. The echoes of mortality that traverse these other poems are not there on the surface, and the ending (beauty is truth, truth beauty) seems to emphasize the triumph of the aesthetic.
4. Though one is tempted to begin at the beginning, there is something to be said for starting at the end, as if an "end" were possible, as if the "end" signalled not merely termination but the fulfillment of desire. The last two lines of the poem—"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" are hardly Keats (though they are often taken as Keats distilled), and hardly great. Keats certainly played with them, putting on and taking off quotation marks. But finally, it matters little whether the urn speaks, or the poet distills. For it is the very nature of the quotation mark to disrupt whatever sense of aesthetic totality the poem might have been aiming at by invoking an "other" context. To quote is to point elsewhere and otherwise—to a foster-child incapable of naming itself or its origin.
5. That elsewhere and otherwise are the poem's construction of a counter-aesthetic, one in which the very marks of speech (with or without quotation marks, the poem ends with the urn's words, or Keats' articulation of them) signal the failure, and not the culmination, of the aesthetic phenomenon. Or as A.R. Ammons puts it, "it is not that words cannot say; it is that what is said cannot be missed if spoken." From the title on, the poem contemplates not so much the urn as its silence, its refusal to yield the secrets that have led to this scene, this poem. Unlike "Nightingale," this is an Ode "on" an object, as if each word, each stanza, were at once revelation and occlusion, a layering process that deepens the difficulty or the impossibility of (the) last words.
6. The questions, raised to a fever pitch, underscore this impossibility. The poem is "on" an urn which depicts scenes wrought "on" it, and this layering effect distances the object from its origin, enfolds it in a silence resistant to the questions raised around it and about it. The urn, the scene, the bride are "still," poised (and posed) in arrested movement, as if a catastrophic event (like lava from a volcano) had

halted the movement of mortality. Whether eternity is curse or blessing is not at all certain, and Keats knew full well the ancient gods' fascination with mortality: the force that annihilates us, but also the force that makes human passion, and love, possible. The passion the poem describes as "human" ("All breathing human passion far above") is in some sense no longer passion but "far above" the turmoil of emotions.

7. It is not enough to say that the force that drives the poem is a desire for immortality; or, conversely, that in that gesture toward immortality the poem loses touch with the temporal, mortal desires constitutive of poetry. For the fact is, the poem "is" there, a gesture, but a complex one that moves in both directions. Or perhaps not "moves," but is rather arrested in its double gesture. Arrested, yet poised, and waiting, for an identification (truth/beauty) that cannot take place. Truth would, like Perseus's Medusa, demolish the possibility of meaning; and meaning is precisely what the poem cannot "know." Despite the certainty and evenness of the poem's pronouncement(s), its force lies in its subtle hesitation, in its almost inaudible doubling back and questioning not the urn but its own progression.
8. And perhaps that moment of hesitation is itself the "sacrifice" the poem makes of its voice, stilling itself in the face of something it does not know how to name any more than it can name itself. The poem is and is not the urn, for the poem layers the silence of the urn with its own inaudibility. Between silence and speech, between the urn's (or poem's) annunciation and its refusal to yield a response to its own questions, the poem hovers, a "silent form" that takes the shape of a lyric punctuated by exclamation marks, colons, and commas hung and taken away. It is as if the poem were not exactly an "offering" but a "waiting," or rather as if its offering were in its waiting.
9. Not exactly a happy ending, not even with—or especially because of—the promise, and the expectation, that such waiting will be endless, that hovering and hesitation are the mode of being of poetry itself. The erotic, in all its mournfulness, is merely one of its figures. The simultaneity in stanza three of exuberant happiness and a heart sorrowful and cloyed underscores this imbrication of eros and death. It is this intersection that, in the end, gives the poet voice and parches his tongue, makes him remember and forget, in a strange admixture of awaiting and oblivion. Awaiting oblivion. Awaiting not the eternity and transcendence the urn promises, but a silence so profound that it makes of the urn the funereal artifact for the poet's (the poem's) remains. Though distanced by the direction of its subject matter from "Nightingale," "Melancholy," "To Autumn," "This Living Hand," and so on, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" returns to the space where the living and dead are not that far apart, where they speak sotto voce, in "whispers out of time."
10. The whispering is heard into the French twentieth century, in the writing of Maurice Blanchot:

"Is there still an instant? — The instant that is between remembering and forgetting. — A brief instant. — Which does not cease. — As for us, neither remembered nor forgotten. — Remembering through forgetting."

"Why this happiness in forgetting? — Happiness itself forgotten."

It is death, she said, the forgetting to die that is death. (*Awaiting Oblivion*, 43)

Keats never forgets to remember, and the Grecian Urn is his most muted yet eloquent archive.

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"Ode on a Grecian Urn": Hypercanonicity & Pedagogy

Hermeneutics for Sophomores

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1. I have taught the "Urn" in a variety of graduate courses, in upper-division undergraduate Romanticism surveys, in critical theory courses, and in sophomore "Great Books" courses and British Literature surveys. Because of what Jim O'Rourke calls its "hypercanonicity," students (and perhaps we their teachers) find it difficult to read the poem itself, rather than simply rehearsing preconceptions. This difficulty exacerbates a more general problem: students at all levels have difficulty reading it as anything other than a narrative, having had little training in either the historical development of the ode form or even the differing interpretive demands of poetry and prose.
2. In the fall of 2000 I had the luxury of addressing some of the relevant formal and generic issues at length, in a graduate seminar at Auburn University entitled "Form and History in Romantic Poetry," in part inspired by Susan Wolfson's *Formal Charges*, which had appeared the previous year. In that course we spent two classes on the Romantic ode, using Paul Fry's *The Poet's Calling and the English Ode*, Cyrus Hamlin's chapter on the ode in *Hermeneutics of Form*, Stuart Curran's very useful chapter on the ode in *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, and some contemporary discussions of the ode, including scattered comments from the poets themselves and parts of Robert Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*. Having already done extensive work on the sonnet, we were able to explore the theory that Keats's ode form developed out of his experimentations with the sonnet, address the relation between the ode and the hymn, discuss the form's public vs. private status, test Curran's hypothesis about the combination of Horatian and Pindaric elements (while reading some Horace and Pindar in translation), and read it alongside some of the other Romantic and pre-Romantic odes that Keats would have known. With that background, the "Urn" pretty much taught itself.
3. Normally, however, the time for that kind of contextualization is not available, and the challenges of teaching the poem in lower-division courses are actually more interesting to discuss, if not always to face. Getting students to read the poem in a sophomore British literature survey with some degree of generic sensitivity takes up so much time that I normally don't do a great deal of detailed historical contextualization. Am I therefore a closet New Critic in the classroom? One of the questions Jim O'Rourke asked us to consider in this assignment is whether we are new historicists in our research who "fall back into formalist New Criticism in the classroom." I will duck the admission of bad faith that this question implies by asserting that I am not, nor have I ever been, a new historicist. But New Criticism (or rather the caricatured ahistorical straw man that is called to mind by that appellation today) is not the only alternative to new-historical discussions of material conditions and ideological displacements, and I do see my own scholarly agenda, informed by a different use of history, as relevant to my teaching of the "Urn."
4. I am interested in hermeneutic theory, particularly as developed by philosophers such as Hans Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, with an emphasis in my recent work on how questions of interpretation intersect with questions of ethics. Therefore I like to look at the way past texts and present readers speak to each other from different but intersecting and historically conditioned horizons. I am not interested in what I see as the impossible and incoherent task of reconstructing a work as it was read at the time, a task that is incoherent on theoretical grounds because it depends on a myth of historical objectivity that is in fact a legacy of Romantic historiography, but also impossible on practical grounds within the constraints of

all but an advanced graduate course. At the same time, I want to emphasize, rather than elide, the historical distance between us and the poem, so I try to squelch any simple discussion of how the poem is "relevant" to our time, with the goal of enabling a less simple discussion of how interpreting such a poem from the past might involve a kind of ethical practice that is in fact relevant now.

5. My interest in these hermeneutic issues may make my approach to the "Urn" a kind of minority report, and it may mark me as old-fashioned. I may also appear to be merely complicating the obvious, since much of what hermeneutics does is bring to the surface the unstated assumptions that guide interpretive practice, assumptions that often operate on a more fundamental level than the specific interpretive methods of a particular literary or cultural theory. However, I think the question of how our interpretive horizons intersect with those established by a past instance of particularly intense interpretive practice is exactly what needs to be emphasized when teaching the poem, particularly in a lower-level course such as a sophomore British Literature survey, in which we are often engaged in the very basic work of teaching students how to read. For many students this will be the only literature class taken in college, and so it can be the one chance to demonstrate the value of literary interpretation and to help them become somewhat more self-conscious about their own interpretive practices. I would argue that the "Urn"'s "hypercanonicity" is at least partly a result of the fact that it is so useful for this purpose.
6. The "Urn" is a particularly good text for these issues because, like all of Keats's odes, but especially the "Ode to Psyche" and the "Ode to a Nightingale," it is so self-conscious about its own interpretive practice. The speaker worries about how to read a "flowery tale" that is directly apprehended ("ditties of no tone" bypassing the "sensual ear" and piped directly to the "spirit"), but which produces more questions than answers, leading to an explicit message about beauty and truth, which is presented as a general statement for future generations, but which is also clearly an end-product of the speaker's interpretive moves throughout the poem. The poem is very specifically concerned with the temporality of interpretation, in its effort to interpret an object that "speaks," albeit silently, from the past, as the "foster-child of silence and slow time," with a message for the future.
7. In spring 2002 I taught the poem in a sophomore British literature survey (Romantics to the present) at Appalachian State University, in which my guiding theme was how the authors we read interpreted the past. For part of the semester we read A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, a story of how two late-twentieth century scholars unearth and relive a romance between two Victorian poets, alongside a good deal of Romantic and Victorian poetry, partly to help us maintain a double focus that is explicit in Byatt's novel: we observed modern relations to past texts as we studied how those texts engaged their own relation to various pasts. With very little encouragement on my part, the "Urn" kept popping up throughout the course well after we had "done" the poem, as a touchstone for other works that treated and in some way idealized a past. Some of the more obvious connections to the "Urn"'s treatment of the past included Matthew Arnold's much more confident idealization of a different brand of Hellenism, Swinburne's juxtaposition of the Greeks' quotidian sense of mortality with the illusions of Christianity, and Yeats's aesthetic Byzantium.
8. I open the discussion of the poem itself (once we have gone through the text and untangled some syntax and vocabulary) by asking students to explore how the poem is about interpretive strategies and the difficulties they entail. We discuss heard vs. unheard melodies, the inadequacy of "our rhyme" to reproduce the work of the "Silvan historian," and the disjunction between the spatiality of the urn's figures and the temporality of the narrative implied by the speaker's questions. Students are so used to reading according to a linear narrative model—"reading for the plot"—that noticing this poem's failure to construct a plot can usefully steer them away from seeing it simply as a story with a moral at the end. Particularly if they have read more obviously dialectical Romantic odes in which one section is opposed or even contradicted by the next (the turns in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," or, better yet, the successive contradictions of Keats's own "Nightingale"), they can begin to see the poem as something

other than a straightforward narrative, in explicit opposition to the speaker's effort to perceive the urn as the teller of a narrative.

9. Some of this ode's interpretive self-consciousness comes with the genre. Without going into a great deal of detail about the history of the ode in English poetry, I ask the students to think about hymns, a genre these North Carolina students, many with strong religious backgrounds, do know something about (Fry's book has an excellent discussion of the Romantic ode as displaced hymn). They can see that the speaker's effort to connect with an idealization "all breathing human passion far above" resembles a hymnist's effort to connect with a deity through praise, thanksgiving, or supplication, but in this case the effort occurs without the security of a religious community confident in the omnipotence and benevolence of the idealization in question. It is easy for students to see that this situation poses some particular interpretive difficulties, and that the object of a hymn is to make a connection, not simply to narrate a story, even as the speaker attempts to extract a narrative from the urn and as the poem ends up narrating the poem's failure to make the desired connection.
10. My agenda is to view the poem as an attempt, or a series of attempts, at a difficult and ultimately incomplete act of interpretation, rather than as a statement or a narrative, and then to see how our interpretive acts intersect with the poem's. Interpretation is always incomplete, because of the finitude of any interpretive horizon, and Keats was more aware than most of how his horizon is limited by his health, education, and social status. The operative conceit of most Romantic odes (perhaps with the notable exception of Keats's "To Autumn") is that the speaker is trying to connect with something that is by definition beyond the speaker's horizon, with the attendant Kantian problems of accessing a noumenal realm inaccessible from the phenomenal: Wordsworth's past in "Tintern Abbey," Shelley's Mont Blanc, Keats's nightingale.
11. For the speaker of the "Urn," this generic interpretive difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that his particular object of interpretation is frustratingly both within and beyond his horizon. The sudden ability, thanks to the imperial insensitivity of Lord Elgin, for someone like Keats to view Greek artifacts directly in the British Museum, puts him into the state of confusion expressed in "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles for the First Time," a poem I usually have students read with the "Urn." Keats is well aware that his knowledge of Greek language and culture is second-hand, which adds to the already inconceivable temporal and spatial distance imposed by what "Elgin Marbles" calls "the rude / Wasting of old time" and the "billyow main." But at the same time, he is able to see these new examples of "Grecian grandeur," previously visible only in two-dimensional pre-photographic reproductions, up close. The shock of this simultaneity of temporal and spatial distance and proximity (a foreign but important perspective for students brought up in the eternal present and presence of video and shopping malls) is at the root of many of the speaker's interpretive difficulties, as is evident in the oscillation between the direct apostrophe in stanzas three and five and the distance implied by the questioning in stanza four. A related phenomenon informs our interpretive perspective. On a simple level, the poem is right there in front of us but interpretively inaccessible in its historical distance. The poem is also familiar and other in another sense: the poem's interpretive horizon is different from our own but also partly constitutive of our own, in the direct sense that our reading is conditioned by the poem in front of us and in the indirect sense that our interpretive practices are historically conditioned by phenomena that include Romanticism.
12. I try to get at these issues concretely by asking students to list the difficulties and ambiguities that the speaker of the "Urn" faces, and the difficulties that we face, and then look for points of comparison and contrast. A sample list of interpretive difficulties for the speaker might look something like this
 1. His inability to read the "leaf-fringed legend"
 2. The urn's refusal to identify the figures ("what men or gods are these?") that are,

however, clearly visible.

3. Difficulties posed by the difference in genre between the urn's tale and "our rhyme"; the impossibility of constructing a narrative about the figures on the urn.
4. Whether to read the lovers' static relation as unfulfilled or undying.
5. The frustration resulting from the desire to interpret an iconic work, representative of a classical past.
6. How to evaluate the "Urn"—is it a "cold Pastoral" or a true "friend" or both?

The list of our own interpretive difficulties (which can legitimately include what advanced students might see as "dumb" questions) might look something like this:

1. How do we make sense out of a poem that is so unsure of itself, given the above?
2. If we are supposed to be those who hear the urn's message in the future "in midst of other woe" than the speaker's, how do we deal with the fact that our access to the urn is even more mediate than the speaker's, since it is filtered through his poem? That is to say, how do we read the message of truth and beauty? As a message for us? As a construct of the speaker's? As a message for us mediated by the poem?
3. Who is saying that last line and a half? Who is the message of truth and beauty for and who is telling whom that this is all we know and all we need to know?
4. Are we supposed to take seriously the equation of truth and beauty and the apparent idealization of the Greek past? (The students will have read the letter to Benjamin Bailey of 22 November 1817 in which Keats says, "What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not," a phrase with plenty of interpretive difficulties of its own. The inevitable discussion of ways to understand the relationship between the biographical Keats and the speaker of the poem often occurs here.)
5. Why can't we agree on an interpretation of this poem after all this time? The words are all right there in front of us.
6. How do we evaluate the poem—is it good art? How do we know? What criteria do we apply? Can we really read all those "happy"s in stanza three with a straight face?

The lists have a number of things in common: both we and Keats find the combined proximity and distance of the object of interpretation disconcerting and question-generating. The speaker's difficulties foreshadow our own, particularly if we take the poem literally and see ourselves as the future addressees of the urn, living "in midst of other woe" than the speaker's after his generation has been wasted by old age. We address the canonical poem with questions as the speaker addresses the canonical urn, and, like the speaker, we find both maddeningly unanswerable questions and "cold" general truths. We try to make a narrative out of the poem, as the speaker tries to make a narrative out of the figures on the urn, and we both are aware of the impossibility of that task. Our evaluation of the poem is likely to be as ambiguous as the speaker's evaluation of the urn.

13. At the same time there are important differences. We probably aren't as worried about the possible equation of truth and beauty, or about an iconic ancient Greece, as Keats is. Even if we aren't new historicists, we are interested in locating the poem within a cultural and aesthetic milieu, rather than directly addressing a mysterious artifact. We have a somewhat readable text before us—a higher-order interpretive act—while his is a lower-order (in the sense of more "basic") encounter with an object that is translated into a higher-order text. The speaker in the ode is singing a displaced hymn, we are writing an interpretation.
14. Am I imposing unfair assumptions about the homogeneity of the students in this use of "we"? That's always worth talking about in this kind of discussion. The fact of the matter is that the students in this class were mostly white, middle-class North Carolinians between the ages of 18 and 22; the "we" of the

present reader might have been factually more complex in a culturally more diverse setting. However, the constitution of the "we" is not solely determined by the cultural make-up of the particular interpretive community. The poem itself, as a common object of interpretation, establishes a common horizon for even a culturally diverse group of readers, as does the syllabus and my own agenda. That double determination of the reader (by both his or her culture and the context established by the class, text, and teacher) gives us an interesting perspective on the second list above: some of our interpretive difficulties stem from differences between our cultural milieu and Keats's, such as our difficulty in taking seriously the equation of truth and beauty, and our lack of reverence for the Greek classical past as an ideal. (It's easier to generalize about what "we" are *not* interested in than what we are interested in.) The nature of these differences will vary with different readers' backgrounds. Other difficulties are posed by the poem itself, such as the actual ambiguities of language (the opening line's "still" as adjective or adverb, the long-standing question of who speaks the last line and a half) and the speaker's unanswerable questions. Still other difficulties result from the *fact* of historical distance (as opposed to the *content* of the historical differences between then and now), including the double mediacy of our access to the "Urn"—he's writing a poem about his encounter with an urn, we are discussing our encounter with his poem about an encounter with an urn—and the need to evaluate the poem as a historical object that has settled into a canon.

15. We share a horizon with Keats in that we are pursuing an interpretive path with him (both in following his interpretive moves in the poem and in interpreting his poem as he interprets the urn), but an important part of that shared horizon is an acknowledgment of otherness: the inaccessibility to the speaker of the urn's story and even the message about truth and beauty (spoken to future generations, not to him) mirrors, with a difference in register, the distance between us and the poem. The poem is "relevant" to us not because its concerns match our own, and definitely not because we construct the text as we read it, but because the interpretive effort it instigates will "tease us out of thought" in forcing us to recognize the value of this shared interpretive work in a conversation between past and present, as we also recognize the importance—both as a reminder of our horizon's finitude and as a reminder that there are worlds beyond our own—of a conversation with that which ultimately resists interpretation.
16. Am I universalizing the poem's "message"? Yes and no. No, in that I'm seeing many of the poem's concerns, such as the equation of truth and beauty and the Hellenistic ideal, as part of a historical horizon most of us do not share. Yes, in that I'm trying to show that the kind of interpretive work performed in and instigated by the poem is, if not strictly a universal phenomenon, at least a legacy of Romanticism that is still an important part of what we do. I admit that this hermeneutic emphasis is partly a strategic choice, perhaps influenced by my role as the chair of an English department, who by virtue of that role is necessarily invested in the institutional context of teaching. Especially at a time when university education is becoming more and more technical and product-oriented, I think it is important to put in a word for interpretive process as a good in itself, and as something worth conscious study. It is true, as I say to prospective English majors, that the interpretive skills you learn doing this kind of thing may get you a better job or a promotion, but it is a more important truth that reading a poem like Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" forces you to become self-conscious about your own interpretive processes. The point is not exactly that this kind of interpretive self-consciousness will make us better people—too much self-conscious interpretation can stall action, ethical or otherwise, and plenty of bad people are expert interpreters—but that our education toward ethical participation in society can in fact be advanced when we simultaneously participate in and observe an interpretive process that actively engages the otherness of the past, the finitude of the interpretive horizon, and the desire to understand that which is both immediately present and just out of reach.

"Ode on a Grecian Urn": Hypercanonicity & Pedagogy

Deforming Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

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1. As a teacher of Romantic poetry for 35 years, I have become impressed not with how hard it is to teach, say, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" but how easy it is. And this I have found disturbing because it implies that on some level the poem is already known; it has not brought its reader to and beyond the horizon of the familiar, which as I see it is one of the main indicators of poetic success. When I ask students to deform a poem after we have discussed it in class, they re-make their understanding of a familiar code of reading in a "sweet struggle" of engagement that honors the poem as an innately resilient and active principle of mind.
2. What in this poem (and by implication many Romantic poems and, for that matter, many poems) makes it seem, in Jerome McGann's word, pre-read and thus not read, as poetry, at all? First, Keats's "Ode" has an enlightenment structure: many questions are asked, in stanzas I and IV, that assume, rhetorically, the presence—available to the speaker or not—of answers. The urn as unravished bride proleptically contains its ravishment as a natural outcome in the ritual of weddings that parallels the consummation of questions asked. And even if stated in a kind of elegiac or tragic negative, other elements are structured around narratives of completion: lover meeting and kissing, trees leafing, ritual sacrifice being performed, citizens leaving and then returning to their town. The poem spins out a series of irreversible narratives of fulfillment. This is precisely analogous to and encouraging of the preferred ritual of reading poems, particularly in school and university classes: the relentless search for the poem's meaning. (Jack Stillinger's recent book on multiple readings of "The Eve of St. Agnes" simply demonstrates that in that poem the ritual can be varied in an astonishing number of ways.) Historicism hasn't particularly changed matters: it simply provides a ready source of answers and, while heightening the resonance of words, images, and voices in poems, it reinforces the enlightenment paradigm.
3. Questions and answers typically presume a questioner who, in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," is the speaker propelling the poem passionately through a series of probings and meditations and finally conclusive praise. We readers become interested in him, as a kind of familiar anchor of reading lyric: the fate of the speaker (the concern of Abrams and Bloom in their immensely influential studies of the "internalized quest romance" of Romantic poems) as the major category of meaning and as the crucial thread that further, through consciousness, binds the enlightenment narrative and rhetoric together. And finally we congratulate this speaker's probings as exemplary of the *work* of enlightenment which again corresponds to the ideal of reading poetry as work.
4. Pre-reading, in this case, occurs in the presence of a poem that triggers a preferred ideological habit of mind; the gratification we get is the purely secondary one of fulfilling the habit. As McGann and Lisa Samuels say, speaking more generally about encounters with instances of traditional poetics: "the rhetorical power of a work of art will ultimately work against itself, dulling our sense of its own freshness" (*Radiant Textuality*, p. 108). And in the language of Blake and Clare, "poetry fetter'd fetters the human race." Deformation is a general term for breaking fetters of reading, coming both from sources internal to the poem and internal to the mind of the reader. It is a form not of pre- but of re-reading, a *nostos* of a more aggressive and wily and yet, oddly, more leisurely and "lazy" or unwarranted return to the poem. In teaching the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," I offer techniques of radical

disruption and defamiliarization (a term, along with "deformation" itself, coming from the Russian formalists), of risking the powerful idea that forms are not sacrosanct, that nonsense in poetry is at least as important as meaning, that poems may "contain" nothing, may refuse the domain of and trajectory towards answers altogether. The result is not the abandonment of critical enterprise but a nearly mystical resurgence of conscious power in the presence of a poem, a surge in thinking and excitement. As the poem appears in/as unfamiliar juxtapositions that I have "made," it occurs to me that those juxtapositions, startlingly, are "there," part of the poem itself. Amazement accompanies my thinking. Adorno: "the only true thoughts are those which do not grasp their own meaning." (*Minima Moralia*)

5. When I deform a poem, I bring to it a highly selective consciousness and intervene materially in its existence, just as Keats does in encountering the Grecian Urn. Think of his decisions and, so to speak, his self-selected regulatory practice!

- 1) he addresses the object; apostrophe is a decision, not something demanded by the urn
- 2) he asks it questions
- 3) he looks not at the urn as a pot or at its use, nor at the act or nature of looking at it, but at the pictures painted on it
- 4) he looks at the pictures strictly as instants of narratives
- 5) he attempts at the end to generalize its significance and value
- 6) he reveals nothing about himself openly, but the fact of apostrophe and the indicators of various emotional and perspectival registers show that his experience of the urn is a major part of what he wants to say on its behalf.

He has deformed the urn in the sense that he hasn't talked about it, for example, as clay (*Greek Anthology*) or as ash (Thomas Browne); he has left out some things in order to emphasize others. The urn is not an object; it is deformed in that it is only its illustrations, its meanings. One thing is certain: for the speaker this encounter with the urn is full of surprise, and what he has seen has "overtaken" his mind. His experience bears little indication of pre-reading (a fact that our growing knowledge of cultural, literary, and artistic sources can only underscore).

6. How different is his practice of selection from, say, deciding to read the poem last line to first? from re-writing the poem as only the sequence of the last word in each line? of reading only its nouns, or its verbs, or its adjectives? of re-writing the poem in the shape of an urn? or in the shape of the ash it may have contained now floating free to earth? or reducing each line to its first two and its last two words leaving out the "stuff" in the middle? or—perhaps most radically (in the manner of Jackson Mac Low)—discovering in sequence, as my student Alex did, the words the beginning letters of which spell out O-d-e-o-n-a-G-r-e-c-i-a-n-u-r-n:

Ode	Our Deities Escaped
on a	On A
Grecian	Cold Emptied River In Arcady—Gods Never,
Urn	Never Remain Unravish'd

All these examples came from the minds of my students who had been practicing deformation for several weeks and who now felt comfortable with the playful aggressiveness deformation usually requires, sensing that such outrageous acts in fact belong to the strangeness of language, image, enchantment, and consciousness that is the occasion of poetry.

7. To say that deformation is simply another name for selection minimizes the radical scale of its intervention. Describing the experience, my student Andrew wrote:

I slowly crushed the piece into different shapes. I broke it down and built it up again. I RETURN, RETURN, DELETE, DELETE, DELETED. Up and down the words skipped, lines jumping and leaping all over the computer screen trampoline.

8. Notice here how material the poem has become. . . or is he talking about the urn itself? If the ekphrasis that is Keats's "Ode" assumes a distance between art object and poem, this deformation emphasizes the visionary tendency of both media to veer empathically towards each other. (Traditional readings would keep them mutually uncontaminated.) The reader furthermore has identified "interpretation" with megalomaniacal destruction and re-creation: crush one urn/poem in order to create a second one in words (his poem re-written as a hieroglyph, a concrete poem in the shape of a Grecian Urn). But magically, the reader's initial choice and "regulatory" act—I will re-form this poem in the shape ("O Attic shape!") of an urn—gives way to the acrobatics of the poem's words and lines independent of his controlling hand, eye, and mind. This is "thought that does not grasp its own meaning." The reader actively performs the poem which, no longer an object and a container of meanings, performs back.
9. Deforming poems thus produces a condition of reading that underscores the principle of experimental poetics, insisting that the making of a work of art requires both a regulatory practice (e.g. read the poem from last line to first, re-write the poem in the shape of an urn, re-write the poem diastically) and an openness to "chance," or experience. This confluence acknowledges a poem as at once under the control of the conscious ego and recording materials beyond its control and creates the poetic narrative of a mind expanding beyond the limits of the familiar and the known. Such a reading practice enacts the process of defamiliarization, a freeing of idiom from convention.
10. The urn never provides answers to the questions, it never "yields" to the ravishing ardor of the speaker. The deformation helps us wonder: does the apostrophic act represent a strange fantasy about art's salvific power?—that it could answer our needs? In one of the most unusual readings of the "Ode" proposed, Dorothy Van Ghent, viewing the "sequence" of the Odes as a Keatsian journey archetype, claimed that the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" signified a failed quest of the hero because of his expectation that an "answer" to his questions about the sources of life (Who? What? from whence?) would appear with a finality from beyond experience and imagination. The deformation suggests that within the goal-driven heat of the speaker resides an "answer" in the form of the non-controlling intervention described by the student. (An answer given, monumentally, from eternity is itself a fantasy of control, as is the assumption that meaning, or meanings, reside permanently in a poem independent of the reader's interventions.)
11. Watch what happens when Ruscha deforms the poem by listing only the last words of each line (last five lines of stanza V):

waste
woe
say'st
all
know.

or (from stanza II):

shed
adieu
unwearied
new
love?

12. Each is a version of the renovative paradigm of visionary poetics—far from either the consoling vision of an all-knowing but enigmatic urn or the ironic and skeptical vision of incomplete but theoretically possible knowledge. In these deformations one observes a sketch of the comic drama of hope, fulfillment, and abundance, sprung from waste and isolation, that characterizes visionary poetics; the important point is that the sketch resides within Keats's Ode. At the same time this renovative trajectory is juxtaposed, say, with what happens when the poem is read from back to front: a movement towards the silence of unanswered questions.
13. These two very different kinds of deformations shift attention from a linear, "penetrating" narrative leading to possession, through knowledge, of the object's value, a hidden depth of value, towards a non-subject-object-oriented set of what might be called spatial harmonics of words, the "unheard melodies" of the poem. Traditional readings of Keats's poetry (even up to the present day) assume a speaker of normative consciousness, a person testing the "limits" of visionary apprehension, an assumption encouraged by Keats's decasyllabic line (associated with speech conducted from the perspective of the social world). Deformation reminds one that persons speaking to urns, nightingales, seasons, and ancient goddesses are not in a state of ordinary consciousness—they do not have their feet on the ground. In fact, their words may not even belong to them: a poem like Keats's "Ode" may be a stream or field of unheard melodies or harmonics that impose on or complement one another in unexpected ways. If, for example, you read the poem backwards and arrive, now late in the poem, at the line "What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape / Of deities or mortals, or of both?" you get:

What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:

14. The "legend," strangely split from its crucial prepositional modifier, is associated with non-verbal nature, with silence and quietness. Legend as story haunts but does not reveal itself; legend as explanation for symbols on a map does not explain. Reading backwards, the "shape" itself remains mysterious. Indeed, the questions that open the stanza vanish like water in sand; or rather, they vanish in the anticipation of the answers they might produce, but they become vivid as "pure" questioning, in their detail, the shape of the stanza: they fill out the image of a questioning consciousness that haunts the space of the poem. Deformation makes one realize how fragile the monumentalizing and epistemologically optimistic trajectory of the "original" poem is and how precarious is the voice of normative consciousness (a point revealed in the following short-line deformation of part of the last stanza, short lines typically being associated with a transformed, disembodied or de-materialized consciousness:

Thou, silent form,
Dost tease us
Out of thought as doth
Eternity.
Cold Pastoral!)

15. Deformation often speaks against monumentalism and certainty in poetry; it makes one see that the overwhelming drive for the oracular truth (as Beauty) found outside the precinct of experience but blessing it is a rescue fantasy. Students find such discoveries, that is, they find the opposite experience of deformative intervention, exhilarating, even if deformation often presents poetry more akin to perceptions of the greater world realities of entropy and oblivion.
16. Consider Adam's deformation, a re-writing of the poem as ASH, big lines of poetry floating free from the top of the page to the bottom, as if he had emptied the urn of its ritualized contents of death. But what is the substance of ash?—practically nothing, the way words are just signs, not meanings, more

non-sense than meaning in poetry! Meaning exists but as an epiphenomenon, accompanying the reading, accumulating, like ash itself as a residue of meaning, haunting the shape of the poem.

17. The shape: in Ovid's phrase, a poem is an *imago vocis*, an image of the voice. All poems are, in some sense, concrete: meaning-centered reading practices (whether focussed on internal relations or historical ones) typically "pass by" the actual sight in search of the signified, like a train speeding through a tunnel. If you see the "Ode" as ash, as an urn itself, as a short-lined poem (the "stuff" of the middle removed), as prose, as a poem with one word per line, you have created a set of commentaries on the visual impact of the original and can no longer assume Keats's choices of line-length and stanza as simply the default position, the transparent container of the poem.
18. Reading the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" this way raises the question: do poems "contain"? or are they surfaces? spatial arrangements? Deformation produces the (all too infrequent) condition of re-reading. To deform a poem is to create a second version of it, the first already known, if only in a "pre-read" way. Reading the poem from poem's close to poem's opening, we are haunted by what has become the leaf-fring'd legend, or dream, of the original. As we read, we picture it in glimpses; we recognize it, but strangely. At the same time we are not reading naively: we have already read the poem, and the consciousness of that poem produces, surprisingly, a spatial image of it as we see it reworked, or in Keats's word, "overwrought." The overwrought (in the emotional sense) search for meaning reduces the poem's space, the poem as an inhabitant of the cosmos (a "real thing," as Keats would say), to a mere line, with meaning "contained" within the poem.
19. When she wrote her "diastic" deformation based on the line "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty" (pick a word from the poem beginning with "B," then a word with "e" as a second letter, another with "a" as the third, and so on), Lisa showed that one harmonic of the "Ode" is "Truth, [is] thus, never near." Or, as Jessica wrote after rearranging the poem so that all rhyming lines were together, "the thing [urn] is gone, and now there is a poem which is slowly growing incomprehensible" (anti-enlightenment trajectory). In both instances not knowing as a condition of the experience of the poem attests, I believe, to the proximity of poetry to death and the invitation it makes to the mind of the reader to expand outward to touch that which is incomprehensible to us; the poem becomes a kind of underworld image into which the reader descends and travels and observes. In Lisa's poem the world becomes populated with divine as well as human life, and the words, as in Keats's famous line, seem to come from afar; her poem, in fact, may be unpacking the famous aphorism:

Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty
Beauty is sweeter struggle.
Truth, thus, never near.
Though beneath the bride of youth,
Deities breathing beauty
Shape leaf-fring'd truth.

20. Truth still is relevant to us, but not because we are "winning near the goal," but because we envision a cosmos which values it. The gods shape it, even in its incomprehensible (to us) form, "leaf-fring'd." (We might call "divine" the presence of Lisa's poem within Keats's.) Focus, instead, on the sweeter struggle that is beauty, active, engaging, even sexual, and notice that "shape" has been transformed from noun (object) to verb (action). What sweeter struggle could we have than to read this deformation kaleidoscopically with Keats's version? In terms of contemporary experimental poetics (from Mallarme onwards) "truth" belongs to a "constellation," a set of correspondences in the cosmos; at the same time it is a signifier in the river of language that is the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," beyond the power of any human ego to control it. One begins to realize that Keats, too, was trying to write a poem about letting go of control but that in this poem he may have been committed to a different, enlightenment rhetoric

of control. Harmonically, however, a more expansive poem resonates—one not beholden to the "fetters" of subjectivity, of conventional syntax and punctuation, of voice, and even of objects as repositories of truth. The motto of the Ode's harmonics might be in Keats's sonnet on what the thrush said:

O fret not after knowledge—I have none
And yet the Evening listens—He who saddens
At thought of Idleness cannot be idle
And he's awake who thinks himself asleep.

21. This "thought of Idleness" brings to mind another outrageous idea about deformation in Keats's "Ode"—that Keats himself may have written his own deformation of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," calling it an "Ode on Indolence," the subject of which confirms a surprising, counter-intuitive consensus in my class about the act of deformation itself as "leisurely," even "lazy." Somehow, as vigorous, aggressive, even industrious and productive as deformation appears, it feels beyond the pale of the work ethic that furrows the brows of scholars and students alike and yet limits both vision and engagement. In that later poem, which Keats "enjoyed" writing more than any other in his "1819 temper," the speaker alludes to an urn in describing a visitation of three figures:

They pass'd, like figures on a marble urn
When shifted round to see the other side;
They came again; as when the urn once more
Is shifted round, the first seen shades return;
And they were strange to me, as may betide
With vases, to one deep in Phidian lore.

22. Readers tend to see this poem as "imperfect," "weak," "immature," compared to the "great" monumental Odes, but "Indolence" supports my class's view of the deformed version of the "Grecian Urn": it proposes a different poetics, strategizes against the enlightenment ardor for knowledge and possession and fulfillment of the ego: "Vanish, ye Phantoms! From my idle spright, / Into the clouds, and never more return!" It disregards "depth" and celebrates surfaces: "My soul had been a lawn besprinkled o'er / With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams: . . ." It invites repetition, remarking that an urn is shifted round more than once so that sights on it "return." The famous textual history of the poem—the uncertainty about the sequence of stanzas—suggests that the poem has no inevitable trajectory but exists in space. (Imagine deforming the poem as a circle of stanzas!) It notes not the familiarity but the "strange"ness of vision and asserts the figures' life independent from the wishes of viewer or maker. And finally it promotes the condition of readerly indolence and implies praise for that habit of mind. Going further, it values what Bataille finds definitive in poetry, its excess of expenditure, its inherent wastefulness. (See Marjorie Levinson for a more elaborate working out of this issue.) In both of his Odes Keats attempts to promote the Urn as object beyond its use-value. Yet my students seemed to accept a course in "lazy" (not use- or meaning-oriented) reading, not as trivial but as a form of serious play. In a course on Romantic poetry, another group of students were surprised to discover, upon reading the "Ode to a Nightingale" backwards that that poem was not about "accepting tragic reality" but about vision in a drugged state (Hemlock, a draught of vintage) and that drugs and oblivion might be what poetry is really about (the true, the blushful Hippocrene), ending as it does with a drowsy numbness; ditto for *Kubla Khan* when shifted round from back to front. I believe my students discovered that their pleasure in and their acute consciousness of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" increased with the riskiness of the playful interventions. Where were they at such moments? Feet clearly not on the ground, clearly not hearing "the voice of busy common-sense," they nonetheless were affirmed, gathering the meaning of things more or less in a dreamy state, as was the poem passing before their eyes. How much more do we really want to accomplish with a student reading a poem?

"Ode on a Grecian Urn": Hypercanonicity & Pedagogy

Three or Four Ways of Looking at an Urn

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1. I teach Keats's "Urn" regularly in three undergraduate courses—in our core freshman-sophomore course called "Understanding Literature" and in two upper-division courses, "The Romantic Movement," and "Romanticism and Its Others." My approach to the poem varies pretty widely, both across these courses and even within them. Our angle of vision depends a good deal not only on the aims of the course, but on my sense of the preparation and responsiveness of the students. And the immediate context provided by other readings makes all the difference. If pressed, I suppose I'd waffle and call what I do most of the time in all three courses "historicized formalism," with the emphasis more on "formalist" in the core course, on "historicized" in the course on Romanticism's "others," and right in the middle (or more explicitly on the fault line) in "Romantic Movement." In all three courses, I try to mingle appreciation for the poem as a powerful and enduring work of art with an understanding that its artistic power flows not in spite of, but in complex combination with, constraining conditions imposed by historical forces.
2. With freshmen, the goal is either to resurrect the poem from the historical graveyard where many students are wont to plant it, or to reclaim it from the insipid poetic heaven into which a revered high-school teacher has catapulted it. For students who tend to think of the poem as just one more of those old-fashioned, frustratingly convoluted, incomprehensible blobs of rhetorical excess that they've been told are the great poems, the "Urn" needs to be dusted off; for devotees, it needs some scuffing up. Both groups need to be encouraged to see the poem as something that still has a life in the here and now.
3. I try to present the poem to these students as a dynamic, self-conflicted, and fruitfully perplexing artifact, written by a poet when he was not much older than they are themselves, that explores love and loss, art and life, confidence and doubt, permanence and temporality, feeling and thinking in ways that can touch upon their own experience and might even move them in some significant way. In the process I try to challenge a view of poetry that I'm finding increasingly and distressingly prevalent, according to which a poem is a more or less elaborate code. Even among those with high verbal SATs and a professed interest in literature, the goal of reading seems to be to find a "hidden meaning" lurking beneath the surface of the poem. The urn is not an urn at all, but a clue to an allegorical or narrative (usually biographical but sometimes more broadly historical) level. Find the organizing substructure and you've "deciphered" (they write tellingly) the poem. You've "done" it, as in "we did this poem in tenth grade." Unless students are awakened to a lively appreciation of the surface of the poem and to the possibility that the poem means exactly what (and everything that) it says, nothing else that we teachers of Romantic-period literature wish to "do" with the poem will amount to much more than doing it in under various guises.
4. In English 130 (the core course), then, the focus is constructing as precise as possible a reading of what the poem actually says, appreciating the intricacies of exactly how it's said, and exploring the relationships between the "what" and the "how." We read the poem in the context of thirty or forty relatively brief lyric poems, written between 1600 and about 1990 by poets from throughout the English-speaking world. Because of its relative length and complexity, and because of its cultural and linguistic distance from us, the "Urn" comes fairly late in the semester, after a good deal of instruction

and/or review in the usual topics: diction and figurative language, meter and sonic effects, imagery. Recently, I have been using Helen Vendler's textbook, *Poems, Poets, Poetry*, which I like because it refuses to apologize, as many textbooks do, for poetic complexity and difficulty. Vendler's book is excellent for teaching students to pay attention to the many ways in which good poems employ the dynamics of sentencing, patterns of imagery, sequence of rhetorical structures, or the minutiae of rhythmic and phonetic organization to swerve significantly from expectations. It returns constantly to the theme that good poems repay careful attention especially to points at which multiple overlapping structures—metrical and syntactical, rhetorical and generic, propositional and imagistic—converge or pull apart, reinforce or undermine one another. The book is particularly good in its emphasis on the potential for creative interplay of temporal and spatial forms of organization. So by the time that my students turn their attention to the "Urn," they have had a good deal of practice in thinking of a poem as simultaneously a performable sequence of speech acts creating what Vendler calls an "emotional arc" and a visual artifact composed of lines, stanzas, and other markers of the poem's constructedness as a text to be seen all at once as well as heard sequentially.

5. Not surprisingly, such an approach leads us where it led Vendler herself in *The Odes of John Keats*; that is, to a consideration of the poem as a work of meta-poetics, in which the rival claims of visual art and poetry are inextricably bound up with the more overt claims of the speaker. Depending on my sense of the level of skepticism about claims of the meta-poetic (it never ceases to amuse me how students will watch, enjoy, and clearly understand a film like *American Beauty*, and at the same time rebel against reading poems as simultaneously about themselves and about their "subject"), I may provide them with some passages about poetry from Keats's letters, just to convince them that, yes, Keats really did think hard about poetic art, beauty, and truth. Or I might mention that the poem was originally published, as was "Ode to a Nightingale" in a journal called *Annals of the Fine Arts*. About half the time (for variety's sake), I will have assigned "Nightingale" to be read in tandem with the "Urn." In semesters where these Odes are paired, the argument for the meta-poetic is, of course, easier to make, as students can see the clear emphasis on expressive sound in one poem, and on silent mimesis in the other.
6. For the most part, however, I am able to keep the contextual information to a minimum in this course, as I encourage students to begin the poem as the speaker does—confronting a perplexing artifact from the past, at a loss to make it speak intelligibly and meaningfully, and therefore thrown into interrogative mode. Without such encouragement to read the poem with what Susan Wolfson calls, quoting Coleridge, "a 'perpetual activity of attention' to the dynamics of a language which, in turn, shapes a drama of the mind's uncertain pursuit of mystery" (305), students will all too readily grasp at one of two views of art which, as the poem itself suggests, threaten to short-circuit complex aesthetic response by explaining away surface dynamics (and gaps, confusions, contradictions, or surprising coalescences). They will want either to sink the poem into narrative or elevate it into philosophical abstraction. (See Vendler on these two options as present within the poem itself; *Odes*, 118-121). For the sinkers, questions raised by the poem's difficulties soon resolve themselves in a view of the poem as an episode in the (sentimentalized) life of Keats, whom they know to have died young in 1821, frustrated in his search for love and poetic fame. The difficulties in the poem are attributable to his "confusion" or "depression" over his own life. In this view, the "bad" poetry of stanza three—"More happy love! more happy, happy love!"—is an eruption straight from the heart of the wounded Keats, more or less excusable in proportion to one's sympathy for failed heartbroken poets. The banality of the closing lines is similarly resolved through an entirely expressive view of art: if it is inadequate that is because Keats wasn't up to making it better. On the other side, the "elevators" tend to ignore the expressive gaps and fissures in the texture of the poem and value it primarily for providing the vehicle for the concise expression of universal truths. "Heard melodies *are* sweet, but those unhear'd / *Are* sweeter." In such a view, the closing lines are unproblematic, as the entire poem has aspired all along to the condition of propositional statement, with some bumps along the way.

7. My task at this level is to encourage students to understand that the poem's surface itself--with all its false starts, undeveloped or contradicted hypotheses, vague or confusing historical or mythological references, unanswered questions, abrupt transitions, rhetorical unevenness, expressive banality and grandeur, sonic brilliance and monotonousness, and architectonic promise and disappointment--is not a code for but an embodiment of what the poem "means." It is a lyric, expressive poem that aspires to the condition of mimetic sculpture and fails significantly in that attempt. It is an impassioned utterance, warmly expressing the desires, fears, hopes, and regrets of John Keats. It is also a deliberately controlled, coolly constructed artifact in which the biographical, expressive Keats is difficult to pinpoint, especially (but not only) in those last lines, so abstracted and detached that we still can't agree about who (or what) "says" them.
8. I've spent a good deal of time discussing my treatment of the "Urn" outside the context of courses in Romanticism because I think that most of what I try to do in situating the "Urn" in an explicitly Romantic context--whether from the "inside" in my "Romantic Movement" course or from the periphery in "Romanticism and Its Others" --depends at some level on an understanding that, however we place the poem in these contexts, it will continue, by virtue of its being a powerful poem, to elude that placement. In "Romantic Movement," the poem tends to become a representative text for one or more themes running through the course, whether it be the historical development of the English lyric, the place of romantic art and theories of imagination in the history of ideas, relations between first- and second-generation poets (especially Keats and Wordsworth), or relationships between poetry and politics, poetry and gender relations, poets and audiences. In this course, students come to the "Urn" very late in the semester, so it is very heavily contextualized by arguments about poetry in the period (especially in Wordsworth's prefaces, Coleridge's *Biographia*, Shelley's "Defence," and Keats's letters), by historical treatments of the lyric (especially Stuart Curran on the ode), by accounts of the development of Keats's imagination (especially Stuart Sperry's), by Wordsworth's poems, other Keats poems (especially the other odes, the Hyperion fragments, and *Lamia*, in which parallels between Lycius's seeing of Lamia and the speaker's seeing in the ode bring out nicely the sorts of gender issues that have been explored by recent critics), by "The Cockney School," and by recent explorations of Keats in relation to the history and politics of his time (especially Nicholas Roe's work). Each of these lenses is helpful and instructive in its way. But if students do not have a sense of the poem as something that is large (or capacious, or complex) enough to admit of being viewed in many different ways, then we run the risk of having one or another of our contexts become the pretext for reducing the poem to allegory or abstraction.
9. In "Romantic Movement," I try to address this concern by incorporating weekly, brief writing assignments in close reading. So, while in class we may be treating the "Urn" primarily in terms of romantic hellenism and the political tensions arising from the Elgin marbles controversy (in fact the tack I've taken most recently, in part because the marbles have been in the news), the student may be writing that week a brief explication of the poem, with special attention to the function of the transitions. Throughout the term, I tell them that much of class time will be spent flying well above the surface of the poems, mapping all sorts of macro-movements in the broad cultural phenomenon (or phenomena) we call "romanticism," but that they need to bail out of the plane periodically really to get the lay of the land.
10. In "Romanticism and Its Others," which I tell students is a course "in everything I didn't need to know about the Romantics when I was in your shoes," it is even more imperative that students have the capacity to appreciate the "Urn" as a poem, since my treatment not only of the "Urn," but of Romanticism in general, is almost entirely focused on what is missing from, or suppressed or occluded in texts conventionally labeled "romantic." The text for this course is Mellor and Matlak's *British Literature, 1780-1830*, and I follow the editors in treating Romanticism as but one chapter (actually a part of a chapter) in the story of a fifty-year period of intellectual, cultural, artistic, and political

ferment. The "Urn," along with Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," and Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," plays the role of representative romantic text in a course largely about texts that are very differently situated in their historical contexts. Fascinating things happen to the "Urn," both as poem and as cultural document, when it is encountered in the context of a course that works, week-by-week, through the large themes of Mellor and Matlak--The French Revolution and the Rights of Man; the Rights of Woman; Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Abolition; Society and Political Economy; Science and Nature; and Aesthetic Theory and Literary Criticism (which includes Romanticism along with Neoclassicism, the Sublime, the Beautiful, and the Picturesque, and Sensibility). Students read the poem early in the course and are asked to locate in it quintessentially Romantic stances such as the focus on the eternal extension of the moment of anticipated sexual fulfillment in stanza two or the flirting with a religion of the aesthetic throughout. As we work through the course we return periodically to the "Urn" and the other "greatest hits of romanticism" to ask how our response to such moments is altered by subsequent readings, whether in Burke and Paine and Wollstonecraft, in Wilberforce on the Slave Trade, in historically undervalued (as "un-romantic") poetic genres (verse epistle, satire, occasional poem, domestic lyric, drama), or in the work of hitherto neglected poets (especially women poets, in the context of whose work "still unravish'd brides of quietness" and passionately pursued nymphs can have a very different resonance indeed). To take just one example, after reading some poems by women poets, especially Lucy Aikin's "Epistles on Women," one student offered the observation that the speaker of the Urn doesn't seem interested in how desirable it would be to *be pursued* throughout eternity. The remark led to a very useful discussion of stanza two of Keats's poem and of our whole project of reading "other" romantic-period texts that I think sharpened our reading both of Keats and of the others, not least because it helped us to see clearly the ironies of stanza two as a moment in the poem where it might be said that beauty is purchased at the expense of (the whole) truth.

11. Such moments notwithstanding, the danger of reducing the "Urn" to an allegory or statement is greater in "Romanticism and its Others" than in "Romantic Movement," in part because the scope of "Others" makes it very difficult to cultivate the sort of close reading that has been the critical consort of the romantic lyric at least for the past fifty years, if not since *Biographia Literaria*. The "otherness" of "Romanticism and its others" is as frequently a matter of genre as of gender, class, ethnicity, or political party. The greater romantic lyric mingles promiscuously with philosophical and literary essays, prose fiction, narrative poems, plays, reviews, political writing, and other genres, with the result that students (and their teacher) must cultivate a more flexible, more comparative and reticulative kind of reading, through which they may connect disparate scraps of text into a provisional whole. The goal of comprehensiveness, good in itself, tends to preclude the sort of patient attention to detail and the ability to remain quietly in the midst of doubts and uncertainties that powerful art demands. I haven't solved this problem to my own satisfaction yet, except insofar as I try frequently to remind students that I've chosen for them a syllabus and an approach that stacks the deck against the Romantic poems, that we're using (with all of the connotations of that verb) the "Urn" and other poems for particular purposes (as indeed we're always using the texts of our courses), and that these poems have a life that extends well beyond this course, and indeed beyond the reach of academic criticism.

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"Ode on a Grecian Urn": Hypercanonicity & Pedagogy

Fifty-nine Ways of Reading "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

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1. Even without seeing a list of contributors to this collection of essays I think I can safely claim to have been acquainted with "Ode on a Grecian Urn" longer than any of the others. I first read the poem in high school in the 1940s just after World War II. I reread it many more times between 1949 and 1958 in surveys, period courses, and seminars as an English major at the University of Texas, an M.A. student at Northwestern, and a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard. Then I taught it at least once every semester—except when I was away on sabbatical leave—for the next four and a half decades at the University of Illinois, most recently in a large undergraduate survey of British literature since the 1780s and a graduate seminar on the topic "The New Romanticism" (the "old" being constituted by Keats and the five other currently canonical male poets of the period, the "new" consisting of those six plus a like number of more recently canonized women poets). I can report from this, first, that in all those years I have never seen students not get interested in Keats and his most famous ode—they walk and drive around listening to rock music or talking on cell phones and then, in class, become very serious about the difference between heard and unheard melodies, about the condition of eternal spring, and about the lovers never being able to kiss—and, second, that I myself have never tired of the experiences of reading and teaching the poem. On the contrary, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" continues to be rich and moving every time I read it—which ought to be remarkable, considering that I have known the 50-line text (really, the several different 50-line texts that are recoverable) word by word, mark by mark, for so many decades.
2. Teachers of my generation (and of the preceding and immediately following generations) were taught to read poetry according to the principles of the New Criticism, the powerful movement initiated in the 1920s by I. A. Richards and practiced influentially in the 1930s and 1940s by William Empson and F. R. Leavis among others in Britain and by Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, and Alan Tate among others in the U.S. The New Critics were combating both the long established "biographical" method of criticism, which involved investigating and relating the facts of authors' lives while paying hardly any attention to the works the authors wrote, and a mindless kind of "appreciation" where works were admired, in general terms, for their wisdom, brilliance, emotional power (*King Lear* was "very moving"!) but were not actually read for either their content or the artistic strategies by which that content was conveyed or, as was frequently the case, subverted. The New Critics advocated a process of "close reading" (sometimes called "slow reading"), examining a text one line, one phrase, even one word at a time. They were interested not in authors' "messages" but in the representation of dramatic (fictionalized) speakers in particular circumstances, and above all in structures of irony, paradox, ambiguity, and contradiction. (If some of this sounds like the approach of the more recent Deconstruction, that is simply because Deconstructionists, too, learned their tactics from the New Critics.) Keats especially, because of the prevalence of paradox and contradiction in his texts, was a frequent subject of New Critical analysis. "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is an exemplary text in Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's extremely influential textbook, *Understanding Poetry* (1938), where it is presented with a dozen questions beginning "In what sense is the urn a 'sylvan historian' (line 3)?" and concluding "Are the last two lines a teasing utterance or not? What is their truth? Do the preceding 48 lines serve to define it?" (474-76). As the subject of a famous essay, "Keats's Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes," in Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn* a decade later, it has a central place

among case studies assembled to demonstrate that "the language of poetry is the language of paradox" (3).

3. We taught, in the good old days of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s—in courses like my department's English 101, "Introduction to Poetry" (required of all English majors)—by posing Brooks-and-Warren-like questions about specific details in the texts. My routine study questions for Keats's odes, which still strike me as fundamentally sound, were a simple triad of (1) What does the speaker want? (what is the speaker's problem?); (2) What contrasts, tensions, ironies, etc. oppose the speaker's desire? (a question about the poem's structure); and (3) Is the opposition resolved? (a question about closure). For class discussion of "Ode on a Grecian Urn," I devised numerous specific questions, such as Who is speaking? Who or what is being addressed? What is odd about an "unravish'd bride"? What do "unravish'd bride" and "foster-child" have in common? In what sense can "quietness" be a husband, or "silence and slow time" foster parents? Beginning in line 5 the poem's syntax itself poses Brooks-and-Warren-like questions that can stimulate class discussion—"What leaf-fring'd legend . . . ?"—and six or seven more questions are asked before the end of the first stanza. The complications multiply with the introduction of several impossible situations in the images of stanzas 2 and 3. In stanza 4 the speaker adds still further questions ("Who are these coming to the sacrifice? . . . What little town . . . ?"). And the poem concludes with the urn's (or someone's) totally incomprehensible "message" of the last two lines, "Beauty is truth" and so on.
4. The poem thus provides very rich materials for class discussion—I could on any occasion easily devise fifty or a hundred questions based on details of the 50-line text—and for several decades my (and I assume many other teachers') standard procedure was to introduce a selection of such questions, get various frequently bright answers from the students, and consider the merits of the answers and their tendencies to nudge toward larger generalizations concerning tone, attitude, thematic meaning, and so on. But I'm sorry to have to report that we operated in a scheme where there were right and wrong answers to the questions. The commonest activity of class discussion in those days was a sequence of wrong answers 1, 2, and 3 (volunteered by three well-meaning students) corrected by right answer 4 (delivered by the teacher). Granted that New Criticism was a matter of an individual reader huddling together with an individual text, doing the line-by-line, word-at-a-time slow reading, when it came to class discussion—Ph.D. professor in the front of the room, face to face with freshman and sophomores who had hardly any experience of life or literature or even much knowledge of the English language—some individual readers were thought to be superior to some others.
5. Confident that I was perfectly justified in correcting students' wrong responses, for several decades I cheerfully carried on the inculcation of an interpretation of Keats's major poems, "Grecian Urn" among them, in which, to put it in the barest possible terms, the theme was skepticism concerning visionary imagination, the various characters (Madeline in "The Eve of St. Agnes," Lycius in "Lamia," the knight in "La Belle Dame," the speakers in the odes) were hoodwinked dreamers, and the basic idea was that, as it is stated in the final stanza of "Ode to a Nightingale," the imagination "cannot cheat so well / As she is fam'd to do." I regularly drew a "Keats Map" on the board in my classes, consisting of a horizontal line dividing an ideal world above the line (heaven, immortality, the supernatural, timelessness, etc.) from an actual world below (earth, mortality, the natural, time, etc.), and had the students position various elements of the poems above and below the line—Madeline's dream in her bedroom above the line, for example, Porphyro, physical love, the rest of the castle, and the storm outside below the line; La Belle Dame's magical grot above the line, the knight's cold hillside of reality below; the Nightingale's forest above, and "here," the world of "hungry generations," below; and so on (for elaboration, see Stillinger, *John Keats: Complete Poems* xvi-xxii and *Reading* 107-13).
6. "Ode on a Grecian Urn" fit the scheme perfectly, with the initial perfection of the permanence depicted in the world of Tempe or the dales of Arcady above the line and the speaker's real world of process,

change, passion, and death below (complicated, as the poem develops, by the speaker's gradual realization, especially evident in the negatives at the end of stanza 4, that the ideal permanence is itself a kind of death, in sharp contrast to the life of "breathing human passion" in the actual world that the speaker earlier wished to escape). In this way my class "discussion" inevitably turned into lecture. I had the truth about Keats's poems, and the students didn't seem to mind taking it in. Accepting my reading was much easier than doing their own interpreting; it saved time and effort in the long run, and the students too believed that the professor's reading was likely to be the correct one.

7. These were, as I said, the good old days, now superseded by much improved ways of understanding poetry. For one thing, the New Critical "slow reading," once so radical in its approach (because, in focusing on "the text itself," it barred from consideration not only history and biography but every other extrinsic source including the dictionary meanings of words in the text), became everybody's ordinary way of approaching a text. For another, the coming-of-age of Literary Theory (here capitalized to give it thematic status like a float in a Fourth of July parade) in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s opened up many more possibilities than had hitherto been thought of for the kinds of meaning that a reader could be aware of in a literary text. Of the twenty or so serious theories that attracted interest (and enthusiastic adherents) in those decades, I'll single out four that I think have had the most influence on our reading of "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

(1) *Deconstruction*—taking a view that literary works are disorganized, illogical, incoherent, essentially indeterminate, and employing a methodology of analyzing works to find mistakes, inconsistencies, gaps, and contradictions—could, as a theory, have been based solely on "Ode on a Grecian Urn," because Keats himself had already written into his text those very incongruities and discordances that Deconstruction was established to expose. The poem has in fact been deconstructing itself for more than 180 years, but for many readers it took 1970s theorizing to make it permissible to say so in class. We now understand, even with the most admired poems, that some conflicts are *not* resolved into agreement, that some closures are not really achieved, and that readers who demand agreement and closure must supply them interpretively, compensating for lacks in the actual texts themselves.

(2) *New Historicism* is an approach based on the idea of literature as a social activity involving not only authors but publishers, editors, printers, booksellers, purchasers, readers, reviewers, critics, teachers, students, and a great deal of nonliterary historical context, including the political and social ideas of everybody involved, local and national and international events, and so on and on. In its political emphasis, New Historicism began as a delicate outgrowth of the Marxist criticism that had some influence in the 1920s and 1930s and then was revived in the 1960s. Politics have always been central in the writings of Blake, Byron, and Percy Shelley among the Romantics and, in a different way (because of their progress from youthful radicalism to middle-aged conservatism), in the writings of Wordsworth and Coleridge. But what, we used to ask, can there possibly be of political interest in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," where a speaker is confronting an old Greek vase with pictures depicting lovers, piper, trees, a sacrificial procession, and musing on vague abstractions about Beauty and Truth? As it turns out, critics beginning in the 1980s have discovered plenty of political concerns in the poem. Keats's centering the poem in Greek life and culture made a point about the ancient origins of the modern revolutionary spirit, for example, and publishing it in *Annals of the Fine Arts* constituted an attack on the art establishment of the time (see, among others, Kelley 221-32; Roe, *John Keats* 85-87; Magnuson 167-210; Cox 165, 185-86; and O'Rourke 75-77).

(3) *Feminism*, which has been enabling readers to see so many imbalances that formerly were invisible, allows one not only to ponder the sexual politics of "unravish'd bride" and the "maidens loth" struggling to escape in stanza 1, as well as the gender of the sacrificial animal in stanza 4, but also to consider more clearly the critical suggestion that Keats chose to write about an urn because its curved

shape resembled that of a woman (Patterson 211-12, 218). Margaret Homans, to mention one of the most helpful critics in this context, does not cite the ode but provides excellent background commentary in her comprehensive account of Keats's relationships with women (both those he knew and those he imagined as readers). Daniel Watkins gives an extended analysis of patriarchal morality in the poem (104-20, 206-11).

(4) *Reader-Response Criticism* (sometimes called Reception Theory) has been making it increasingly reasonable—in books and articles, in the classroom, and in social activity more generally—to accept the diversity of individual responses to complex poetic texts. The title of the present essay, which for the occasion could more accurately have been phrased "*Teaching Fifty-nine Ways of Reading 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,'*" takes off from my 1999 book on multiple ways of interpreting "*The Eve of St. Agnes,*" which in a central chapter (accompanied by a list in an appendix) presents fifty-nine different interpretations of Keats's narrative, some of them in direct conflict with some of the others, and maintains that all fifty-nine are legitimate readings and none of them is "wrong" (*Reading* 35-77, 147-49). In my preface I announce an ideal of "interpretive democracy," and in a chapter on how we individually process the profusion of stimuli received from Keats's lines I advocate a practice of "no-fault reading" whereby, again, responses cannot be right or wrong, merely more or less interesting (ix, 89-96).

8. I have been teaching undergraduates on these principles for a dozen or more years, ever since I became interested in the idea of "multiples" in the basic components of a literary transaction—multiple authorship of works that we usually assume to have been written by a solitary genius; multiple textual versions of famous works in the canon; and, what is most relevant to the present occasion, multiple interpretations of those works everywhere one turns in the critical literature (by the most sophisticated of readers) and the classroom (by some of the most naïve). In general students have responded favorably to my approach, several over the years even remarking—after the exams were finished and the grades turned in—that the idea of no-fault reading had changed their lives! Friends, colleagues, and reviewers have been similarly approving, though not exactly in the same extravagant language.
9. The chief question that arises (from colleagues and reviewers, if not from students) is how one teaches a complex poem in a scheme where there are no wrong answers concerning the points being raised. In *Reading "The Eve of St. Agnes"* I quote Alvin Kernan's contemptuous depiction of no-fault readers as a group of savages "who have a great deal of difficulty piecing out the broken signs on the printed page" (*Reading* 91; Kernan 144). I counter this with numerous situations where multiple responses—contradictory and even "wrong" assertions among them—enhance the richness and complexity of the reading experience (*Reading* 89-96). The text of "*Ode on a Grecian Urn*" provides conflicting stimuli in practically every line—"Fair youth . . . thou canst not leave / Thy song . . . Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss . . . She cannot fade . . . thou hast not thy bliss . . . And, little town, thy streets for evermore / Will silent be" and so on. With lines like these, the responses *have* to be multiple and contradictory.
10. Keats's well-known ideal of poetic disinterestedness—"Negative Capability," he called it, "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Keats's *Letters* 1:193)—can be usefully applied to the author-text-reader transaction in "*Ode on a Grecian Urn.*" We have in the first place a negatively capable author/speaker who asks a great many questions about activities depicted on the urn, gets no answers to his questions (unless "Beauty is truth" is supposed to be one), but remains content in his situation of uncertainties, mysteries, doubts. We know he is content simply because the final lines, while lacking the logic that would enable clear paraphrase, have an unmistakable *air* of resolution about them—the message is from "a friend to man" and its wisdom is "all ye need to know." We have in the second place a negatively capable text, in the sense that it is an epitomizing texture of uncertainties, mysteries, doubts—possibly the best example of

comparable length in all of English poetry. And in the third place, with the help of reader-response thinking we can say that we have negatively capable readers as well, who, like the author/speaker, similarly don't know the answers to the questions but are satisfied without knowing, accepting at the end a kind of contented irresolution. In recent years, in trying to position the poet himself on the Keats Map, I have imagined Keats standing outside "Ode on a Grecian Urn" looking on with his readers and wondering, with each successive reading, how the various conflicts will get resolved, with the possibility (for Keats and the readers alike) that they will be resolved a different way each time. This is not a bad premise on which to conduct class discussion of the poem. It certainly beats fifty minutes of interpretive dicta from the front of the class.

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"Ode on a Grecian Urn": Hypercanonicity & Pedagogy

Keats's Widely-Taught and Well-Wrought "Urn"

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1. How one approaches Keats's ode in the classroom will depend, of course, on the kind of classroom and the nature of the class. The hypercanonicity of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" stems in part from its usefulness in various pedagogical settings, from the British Romanticism survey to the Introduction to Poetry class to the course on literary criticism. Like Wordsworth's "Lucy" poems, "Grecian Urn" is a target text for exemplifying major issues and ideas in British Romanticism, for studying the genre of the lyric, and for illustrating various critical and theoretical approaches. As James O'Rourke's recent *Keats's Odes and Contemporary Criticism* has ably demonstrated, the poem is especially well suited to foregrounding the debate between formalist, deconstructionist, historicist, and feminist ways of reading and teaching.
2. My own pedagogy, while eclectic, is biased toward formalism for several reasons, including, inescapably, my early training in the New Criticism and my reservations concerning the extra-literary direction of literary studies over the last several decades. More importantly, however, one tries to identify students' needs, and in my experience, students—and I am not referring to ESL students—have never been more in need of learning how to read. I mean by "read" not just the ability to respond with comprehension and sensitivity to what used to be called "poetic" as opposed to "scientific" or "discursive" writing. I mean also the ability to decode even mildly complex uses of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary and thus to analyze and understand a written text on a paraphrastic, much less a fully "literary," level.
3. It will come as no surprise, then, that I spend a lot of class time on "close reading," although I do not delimit that methodology in the ways that Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, and other New Critics tended to do. I like to teach Keats's "Urn" in conjunction with "Ode to a Nightingale," often assigning a preliminary writing assignment (formal or informal) in which I ask students to discuss the two poems with special attention to the endings of each. I focus on the endings for some obvious reasons. For one thing, the notorious "who says what to whom" problem in the "Urn"'s last lines still catches students—even advanced students—by surprise. Many simply do not see the various grammatical and syntactical possibilities for meaning at a first (or even third) reading, nor have most ever thought about the material nature of a text, the determinant role of editing, or the importance of publication history. (The major Romantic anthologies all include commentary on the "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" crux, although many undergraduates seem opposed on principle to reading footnotes.) The "Urn" is an excellent vehicle for introducing such things and for forcing students to pause, in their headlong gallop toward subjective response or ideological pronouncement, to ponder the grammatical and semantic relations between pronouns and antecedents in the English language.
4. Attention to the concept of closure implicates the concept of form or structure, which opens up discussion of theme, tone, persona, diction, and other formalist preoccupations. The anthology I use most often for Introduction to Literary Study I, a foundation course for English majors, includes the "Urn" in the chapter on "Word Choice, Word Order, and Tone." My teaching points are not particularly original and are indebted to, among others, M. H. Abrams's classic statement on "the greater Romantic lyric." I tend to present the structure of the ode as processive, that is, as revealing the persona's dynamic processes of thought and feeling as they develop, line by line, from stanza one through stanza

five. I ask students to identify what they take to be definitive shifts in the speaker's responses and thus in the argument and structure of the poem. We usually agree, as do most critics, that stanza four marks a fundamental formal and thematic turning point. The persistent questioning of stanza one reappears, but directed now to a very different scene with very different implications. Instead of a timeless and erotic Hellenic pastoral in which the disparity between "deities" and "mortals" is inconsequential, the speaker interrogates a religious sacrifice with its intrinsic reminders of human mortality and limitation. The scene provokes him to imagine a "desolat[ion]" beyond the capacity of the urn to picture or explain and thus initiates the highly-wrought ambiguities of the closing stanza.

5. Comparing/contrasting poetic texts is a good way to teach reading skills, and juxtaposing the "Nightingale" and the "Urn" encourages students to make precise discriminations involving tone and theme. That one poem ends in a question, the other in a declarative statement is a starting point, and students usually identify the "Nightingale" as the more obviously skeptical and "emotional" of the two poems. They come to a better appreciation of the ambiguity and feeling in the "Urn," however, as we examine the various tonal ironies of "brede," "overwrought," and "Cold Pastoral" and the deceptive assurance of the "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" pronouncement in stanza five. We then move back to the paradoxical portrayal of artistic transcendence in stanzas two and three. Students rarely seem to notice without prodding the problematic effects of the double negatives and repeated "happy"s in those stanzas but are eager to interpret them when they are pointed out.
6. An attempt to define as specifically as possible the tone of Keats's "Urn" affords an opportunity to introduce the December, 1817 "Negative Capability" letter. The letter as a whole, with its references to the visual arts, its celebration of artistic "intensity," and its use of the phrase "Beauty & Truth," makes a useful commentary on the poem and moves students beyond a reductively formalistic preoccupation with the "words on the page." I ask students to apply Keats's ideas on Negative Capability to the "Urn." Compared to the "Nightingale" (or "To Autumn"), for example, does the poem "remain (sic) content with half knowledge"? Does it achieve an aesthetic form, a "sense of Beauty," capable of "overcoming" or "obliterating" its implicit "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts"? I also often introduce Coleridge's organicist view of "the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities" in chapter fourteen of *Biographia Literaria* as another relevant theoretical statement. We generally agree that the "Urn" achieves a degree of "negative capability" or "balance" or what Brooks called "dramatic wholeness" greater than that achieved in the "Nightingale" but less than that achieved in "To Autumn." The point, of course, is not to construct an evaluative hierarchy or come to absolute conclusions but to get students thinking carefully about tone, context, and diction, and about their own critical and aesthetic responses.
7. In upper-division and graduate classes on Romanticism, I teach Keats as a second-generation Romantic and foreground the skeptical idealism that characterizes that belated generation. In such classes, I tend to adopt a quasi-deconstructive critical stance, approaching the "Urn" as a meta-text that comments self-reflexively on Romantic idealist aesthetics and metaphysics. Using familiar deconstructive moves, I push students beyond the more or less "balanced" ambiguity of a formalist reading towards a more radically ambivalent interpretation that foregrounds the unresolved (and presumably irresolvable) relationship between transcendent meaning and material form. As a way of reading, deconstruction is particularly well-suited, I think, to illuminate the textual complexities, if not to evaluate the metaphysical, aesthetic, and emotional commitments, of a Romantic idealist poetics.
8. Although I do not completely buy Paul de Man's distinction between symbol and allegory, his equation of the symbolic and the aesthetic works nicely as a way into Keats's ode. The poem strives to construct the well-wrought urn as a symbolic form, as an eternal work of art capable of representing the ideal perfections Romanticism attributed both to nature and to Hellenism. The poem seeks to idealize the urn, that is, as an embodiment (and thus an expression), as an incarnation (and thus a revelation) of

transcendent and intelligible meaning in a sensible form. At the same time, however, the poem includes subtextual elements (de Man would call them "allegorical") that put into question the very possibility of an aesthetic symbolism uncontaminated by and transcending temporal, material reality.

9. In stanza one, for example, the urn is represented as both "historian" and poet, but the speaker cannot decode the "flowery tale" it tells, a readerly and writerly failure intensified, as already mentioned, in stanza four. The tonal and thematic inconsistencies in stanzas two and three also point to an underlying metaphysical and poetic dilemma. An ideal order "far above" the exigencies of material human existence—including attempts to "Pipe . . . spirit ditties" to a non-"sensual ear"—can only be expressed in terms of the same naturalistic and sensual order that the speaker desires to transcend. Vehicle obscures tenor, signifier compromises signified, language deconstructs meaning.
10. A similar problem unfolds in stanza five as the speaker seeks to elicit from the urn a transcendental message both aesthetic and ontological that will bring the poem to thematic and formal closure and that will confirm the urn's (and the poem's) status as a revelatory Romantic symbol. Not only is the revelation itself largely undecidable, however, but the speaker's conflicting attempts at personification and apostrophe betray, as figurative language so often does, his (and our) epistemological uncertainties. Is the urn a "silent form" that leads us beyond intelligibility (and speech) altogether, or is it a loquacious, even sententious "friend" speaking a higher, but still explicable, wisdom? The speaker, like the text, and like second-generation British Romanticism, can (indeed must) desire an answer, but cannot know.

Romanticism and Patriotism: Nation, Empire, Bodies, Rhetoric

Teaching Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in New Zealand

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1. Who is Keats? What is a Grecian urn? What is an ode? These questions are common ones in my classroom. I teach Keats's poetry as part of a third-year, twelve-week survey course on English Romantic Literature in the School of English, Film, and Theatre at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, in the context of a three-year BA programme. Two hours per week are devoted to lectures to the whole group of students (53 in 2002); in addition there is a weekly one-hour tutorial, a discussion session in groups of about fifteen. Three lectures and one tutorial are assigned to Keats. Our textbook is Duncan Wu's *Romanticism* (second edition; Blackwell).
2. My students' ignorance of Keats and nineteenth-century British literature in general has nothing to do with lack of brains or motivation. In order to fulfil their English major requirement our students take two "pre-twentieth century courses", a very modest requirement which leaves them, at the end of their degree, likely to be just as familiar with New Zealand, Australian, South African literature as with so-called canonical English literature.¹ "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is generally not taught in secondary school, and at university one can easily major in English without having come across any of Keats's poetry. No wonder then that, while we as university teachers and researchers think of Keats's poetry as canonical, burdened with jaded conservatism, the students, who have consciously taken this course as a choice among many, are not burdened with such thoughts at all. For most of them, the encounter with Keats's poetry is an exciting discovery—a new planet swimming into their ken—as opposed to imposition of an outdated canon.
3. The fact that we still think of Keats as a canonical author, an inevitable, and, in fashionably theoretical terms, unwelcome, jaded presence in our curriculum may have something to do with the separation between research and teaching which has become part of our profession. The theoretical debate, and its research outcomes, about the problematic nature of the canon was originally based on a particular curriculum of so-called masterpieces, and the pedagogical, largely New Critical approach, associated with it. For funding and prestige purposes universities in the US, the UK, and the richer nations of the Commonwealth in general, have been moving towards an apartheid system of lavishly paid, tenured full-time research stars and underpaid, non-tenured adjunct instructors. Tenure and promotion are, despite lip service to excellence in teaching, largely research based, but research about pedagogical issues has become increasingly divorced from any actual classroom practice. It is, ironically, possible for a research professor to write about the theoretical context of pedagogical approaches to "Ode on a Grecian Urn" without actually having to deal with the poem in the classroom on any regular basis. The main challenge for me as a tenured university researcher and teacher is to establish and maintain a teaching-research nexus, a dynamic connection between two aspects of my job, namely the exploration of and communication about beautiful and stimulating Romantic texts. This process is an exchange between the students and me, and any ideas or approaches which I may hope to convey cannot be divorced from the responses and the contributions of the students. Bearing the importance of a common meeting ground in mind, I have decided that the tutorial is to be devoted to the close reading of a poem, that it should be in other words an opportunity for the students to encounter the poem itself (as opposed to critical writings about the poem).

4. The only difference between research and teaching is audience and the knowledge or skills we expect our audience to have. In scholarly articles I write for a community of peers who have a longstanding familiarity with the period and its texts. In the classroom no assumptions about specific prior or common knowledge of the materials can be made, but the students do bring with them a range of living experiences which influence their reading. Most remarkably, for the majority of them the fact that Keats was writing when he was roughly their age strikes a crucial chord, and this perceived sense of contemporariness makes their study of Keats different from their perception of, for instance, Wordsworth and Coleridge, the two other major authors in the course. Keats's youth and tragically early death conspire with the immediacy of his letters (so many of which emphasize empathy, discovery, passionate intensity and the inevitable vulnerability which accompanies it) to attract students who are in the first stages of independent adulthood themselves. In "Ode on a Grecian Urn" the passionate intellectual curiosity of the speaker appeals to the students. The reality that most of my students "fall for" Keats, almost instantly like and admire him, is a tremendous advantage. With Keats, more than with any of the other poets in the course (with the exception perhaps of John Clare), the students are fascinated by the combination of his personal and poetical qualities. As a teacher I make the most of my students' partiality for Keats by organizing my lectures and tutorials around the possible grounds for this fondness. The quality which makes Keats most appealing to my students is his openness to experience and its bafflements, his delight in articulating the dynamics of trial and error in exploration and discovery, in encounters with texts, nature, people, and artefacts such as Grecian urns. What makes Keats specifically attractive to students who are about twenty years old (or who remember what it was like to be twenty years old) is the ardour of the pursuer as we find him or her portrayed in letters and poems.² At the same time, what makes Keats particularly admirable to young adults is his moral intelligence, his striving for unselfish friendship and love, and his acknowledgment of a complex picture which cannot be fully comprehended or contained: "Things cannot to the will / Be settled, but they tease us out of thought" ("Dear Reynolds, as last night I lay in bed", ll. 76-77) (181). In particular, in the classroom I address the same issue which informs my own research about Keats: his ability to express the necessity to give form to, to substantiate desire into a passion which lasts beyond the moment by focusing on the dynamics and the energy of encounters.
5. I teach "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in a context which emphasizes Keats's poetics of encounter and the passionate intensity which characterizes these encounters. "Form" figures prominently, particularly so for "Ode on a Grecian Urn," a poem about an artefact (a formal structure about a formal structure). In a questionnaire conducted in the first trimester of 2002 I asked my 53 ENGL 311 students to comment on what they found most helpful and most enjoyable in their study of "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Many students commented on how they enjoyed formal analysis in a discussion-style tutorial ("coming to terms with the actual structure, building blocks of the poem"). The "thing itself", the poem, is their preferred starting point in discussion (as opposed to an article about the poem), in very much the same fashion that the urn is in front (mentally or physically) of the speaker of the poem. One student commented on how this approach gives them all something "to sink their teeth into" and how it gives them "a sense of ownership." In practical terms our tutorial about "Ode on a Grecian Urn" takes initially the form of a discussion about the plot of the poem (who is speaking? how does this speaker address the urn? what does the speaker want? what does the speaker "see" on the urn? how do we find out about this?), an approach which I was introduced to in graduate school at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the Romantic seminars of Jack Stillinger and the Professional Seminar on teaching literature of Nina Baym. First of all, the advantage of this approach is that straightforward, supposedly "fact" focused questions trigger discussion of more complex, ambivalent questions. For instance, as we worked our way through the poem it became obvious that the initial address, the initial substantiation of the urn, goes through a process of transformation. From addressing the urn in problematic human terms (unravished bride, fosterchild, sylvan historian), the speaker ends up acknowledging the urn as an artificial, but stimulating presence to human eyes ("a friend to man"). The

initial encounter, a very one sided tribute from the speaker to the urn in the opening lines, has been turned into an affirmation of a dynamic in which beauty and truth need to be couched in an interpretive act of the beholder. Secondly, the "plot" approach also ensures that we do not take any of the ingredients of the poem for granted. The idea of a "Grecian urn", for instance, is not necessarily familiar to the students; overheads and illustrations are brought in (based on those in Ian Jack's *Keats and the Mirror of Art*) to give an idea of the kinds of materials which may have inspired Keats.

6. The initial anthropomorphic "loneliness" of the urn is replaced at the end of the poem by an affirmation of its formal features (shape, attitude, brede of marble men and maidens, silent form, cold pastoral). The speaker's recognition of the urn's form substantiates its meaning of beauty and truth for those who view it. The fictional little town, the urn's original home, is a representation of a possible living context from which the urn has been lifted. The importance of context for the Grecian urn and the problem of substantiating it within formal constraints can be extended to Keats's larger cultural context. This is where the lectures are useful: Keats's literary and cultural context, his reading and thinking are directly related to the poems.
7. The first lecture is devoted to a number of points, all of which clarify Keats's context and which illustrate the differences from, primarily, Wordsworth's and Coleridge's poetics. Keats's friendships with Leigh Hunt and Benjamin Robert Haydon introduced him to *The Examiner* and *The Annals of the Fine Arts*, in which "Ode on a Grecian Urn" was first published. The political connotations of *The Examiner* and the larger cultural context of *The Annals* are briefly considered. By considering some of the major letters (truth of the imagination, human life as mansion of many apartments, poetical character and chameleon poet, negative capability) and sonnets ("Chapman's Homer", "When I have fears", "On sitting down to read King Lear"), I stress the importance of reading and formally articulating a response to reading in Keats's work. Reading Homer through the lens of an Elizabethan, re-reading Shakespeare, reading the sky for new planets all affirm the importance of exploration and discovery which is channelled in a poetical form. Those processes often take the form of a greeting, a salutation which incorporates a sense of astonishment and confirmation at the same time. Before moving on to the odes we spend some time on "The Eve of St Agnes" and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." Both poems are read primarily for their portrayal of sexually charged encounters which do not conform to fairy tale scenarios despite the formal markers of romance. Both poems also portray problems which the main characters face when attempting to substantiate their desire into tangible reality. "Isabella" and "Lamia" would also be good choices here. The possibly tragic vision implicit in these poems is counterbalanced by the intensity of characters or speakers to substantiate their desires into actual encounters which accommodate these desires. Isabella's fervent digging, Lamia's painful transformation, Madeline's loss of control over her ritual all suggest the breakdown, or the transcendence, of boundaries of embarrassment or social decorum (which is also what we witness on the urn to some extent). Because of time constraints I usually leave out "Lamia" and the *Hyperions* altogether in favor of focusing on the odes as a group in the second lecture.
8. The odes stage encounters between speakers and concepts (Psyche, nightingale, urn, autumn, melancholy) in which the speaker needs to accommodate or substantiate the addressed abstraction or form. For "Ode on a Grecian Urn" I emphasize how difficult it is to attribute meaning to something which has been taken out of its original context. Problems of context are a major issue for museums, and for the students it comes as quite surprise that public access to works of art, by way of the museum, was a relatively new experience in Keats's time. As James Heffernan pointed out, Keats's ode on the urn "was made possible by the collections of classical vases and marbles Keats saw at the British Museum, founded in 1753, which acquired the vases in 1772 and the marbles (from Lord Elgin) in 1816, just three years before Keats wrote his ode" (93). The frustration of fragmentation, of isolation, is also part of the debate surrounding the then recently acquired Parthenon marbles by Lord Elgin, as their originality was championed by Benjamin Robert Haydon in the pages of *The Annals of the Fine*

Arts. And for the middle class consumer, the taste for Grecian urns was also catered for by the tremendously popular Wedgwood pottery. In the lectures I try to illustrate that there was indeed a cultural context for Keats's poems to originate in.

9. The focus on context, both in tutorials and lectures, emphasizes that banal generalities such as "beauty" and "truth" can only be substantiated by the interpretive act of the beholder. The fragmentation which befell the Parthenon Marbles after having been removed from their context is also applicable to the urn in the poem, which has been lifted out of its original context into a world of artifice, the museum pedestal or the engraving. When I saw the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum in April 2002, I was impressed by the video set-up in an adjacent room which illustrated the position of the marbles on the original building. The evocation of the sacrificial ritual and the little town in stanza four of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" serves a similar purpose of creative reconstruction. For Keats, "Truth" is always the "truth of the imagination," the positive construction of a desired vision, and the resultant "Beauty" is the enduring form in which this vision has been cast. What we achieve in the classroom or in the lecture theatre is a creative, dynamic reconstruction of the contexts in which Keats's poetry took shape.

Notes

¹ For more information about English majoring requirements at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, see <<http://www.vuw.ac.nz/seft/>>. I am grateful to the 2001 and 2002 ENGL 311 students for their enthusiasm, their advice and ideas.

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² See the letter to Bailey: "every mental pursuit takes its reality and worth from the ardour of the pursuer" (73).

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"Ode on a Grecian Urn": Hypercanonicity & Pedagogy

The Timeless in Its Time: Engaging Students in a Close-reading and Discussion of the Historical Contexts of "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

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1. In both survey courses and specialized seminars on Romanticism, I like to engage students in the tension between the "internal," personal, romantic poem and its "external" participation in the historical context. Particularly in discussions of hypercanonical works, often presented as "timeless," it is useful for students to grapple with ways in which such a work can be reconstituted within its historical moment. Interesting discussions and debates emerge since students generally like to locate themselves in various camps, defending the timeless work of art, defending the poem as solely the author's personal expression, or just as adamantly reading the work as a public statement, bound by its particular historical moment. Moreover, students often see these modes of reading as incompatible. Is the poem a deeply felt personal expression, or is it a public statement, having less to do with the poet's emotional interior than it does with the volatile politics of nineteenth-century England? Or does the poem's significance reside in a transcendent realm of art, outside the bounds of history or biography altogether? My goal is to allow for a discussion of the poetry that can encompass all of these registers simultaneously. Naturally, Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" presents a remarkably rich site in which to explore these tensions.
2. At the point of the course when we get to the "Urn," students have noted that, for Keats, nature is the realm not only of the timeless beauty of "rocks and stones and trees," but also of sensuality, sexuality, and notably of suffering and mortality - a perpetual curb to any transcendent ideal. They have seen this exemplified most profoundly in the Nightingale ode, and it is crucial to consider "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in relation to this poem. Helen Vendler and others have stressed that Keats's odes should be read in relation to one another, and this holds particularly true for these two odes. It is useful to remember that "Ode on a Grecian Urn" follows the nightingale ode in both the 1820 volume and in their earlier, first, publications in *The Annals of Fine Arts*. In significant ways the second ode, in Vendler's phrase, is "as near a twin to the earlier ode as one poem can be to another" (*The Odes of John Keats*, 116). It answers and continues the first. The "Ode to the Nightingale," celebrates the "immortal Bird," like the urn, as a generalized ideal of beauty. In the *Annals* publications, however, both poems are surrounded by essays by Hazlitt and B.R. Haydon which severely criticize the aesthetic ideal promoted by Sir Joshua Reynolds and the Royal Academy. Both Hazlitt and Haydon strenuously promote the verisimilitude of the Elgin Marbles, their truth to nature, over what they cast as the conceptual and artificial aesthetic favored by the Royal Academy, which is treated in these essays as an extension of the corrupt Regency government. (Haydon reminds his readers that it is no accident this body is known as the *Royal Academy*.) Students have seen photocopies of selections of these essays, as well as of the versions of the odes printed in the *Annals*. They are familiar with some of the political-reformist implications of this debate over "legitimate" aesthetic authority and of the subtle innuendoes inherent in this discourse. In this context, the tensions concerning the timelessness of a work of art and its engagement with an historical moment are profoundly apparent as the *subject matter* of Keats's odes. Students can see that Keats himself, in these poems, is grappling with some of the same issues of art and meaning that they are also now confronting. The title, for starters, of the Nightingale ode, both in the *Annals* and in Keats's manuscripts is significantly not "Ode to a" but to "*the* Nightingale." As Robert Gittings has pointed out the "a" of the 1820 volume seems to have been the publisher's decision.

Keats's "*the*" presents a "universal," which stresses the timeless ideal of beauty represented by the nightingale—beyond the realm of suffering (detailed in stanza III) which Keats would escape. Stanza III, however, anchors this visionary experience in an excruciating awareness of human limitation. Students have devoted a good amount of class time discussing how, with cold skill, these lines present a list of unavoidable "natural" facts, facts the students must face themselves, including age, loss of love, sickness, suffering and death, all of which prefigures the failure of the imagined ideal in the final stanza: "Adieu, the fancy cannot cheat so well/ As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf"! If the imagination can seem a "cheat," however, Keats is loath to rest with this. Here, in relation to the poem's conclusion, I have the students consider Keats's concept of negative capability. The concluding lines, students gradually note, leave us hovering in an ambiguous, or negatively-capable, state in which the transcendent ideal vies with mortal limitations for the last word: "Was it a vision? Or a waking dream? / Fled is that music? Do I wake or sleep?" The question mark after "Fled is that music?" (present only in the *Annals* version) adds to the ambiguity. Naturally this gives rise to an open-ended discussion, which suits well my goal of unsettling students' desires for a single "legitimate" interpretation. Does the music of the bird, and all its implications of transcendent, eternal presence remain, merely unperceived by the "dull brain [that] perplexes and retards"? Is its *absence* the illusion? Set in relation to Hazlitt's and Haydon's discourses, the ode seems less a duplication of their arguments than an active working out of a critique. By both positing and unsettling universal ideals of beauty, whether natural or conceptual, Keats marks his own place in the public discourse, with an impassioned questioning of issues that deeply concern him personally—enmeshed with his own grappling with personal suffering, and his personal poetic project. But also, in this "timeless" work, Keats overtly participates in a contemporary public dialogue concerning the potential meanings of art.

3. This engagement with public issues, beyond the merely personal, continues in the ode "Ode on a Grecian Urn," where the first-person "I" of the Nightingale ode interestingly shifts to a more distanced, subtly more "objective," "thou." The ode has traditionally been read as *either* a successfully autonomous poem celebrating an ideal of aesthetic beauty, or, more recently, as an attempt at this goal but fraught with all the ideological contradictions and paradoxes inherent to an idealist aesthetic. Paul Magnuson notes, however, that this line of criticism "has appropriated [Keats's] poem for an ideology opposite that of the *Annals of the Fine Arts*," and that "the strange fate of the 'Ode On a Grecian Urn' is to have become an idealized object, when its original context strongly denied the existence of that ideal" (*Public Romanticism*, 169). While the "Ode to the Nightingale" ambiguously keeps the ideal in float, "On a Grecian Urn" echoes Haydon's and Hazlitt's denial of a "beau ideal," favoring a poetics of sensation, and vehemently reconfiguring the ideal as emerging from the empirical. Haydon (in a passage from the *Annals* I photocopy for students), clarifies the debate in terms which frame Keats's poem:

There was but one period of art in the world which can be said to approach perfection, viz. the period of Phidias [sculptor of the Elgin Marbles], whose great principle was to restore every object represented to the qualities and properties bestowed on that object at its creation, adapted to its intellect or instinct, and then to clear these qualities or properties from the results of accident and disease, to their essential powers: thus, a god was only a human being in his highest perfection, with the qualities of a human being restored, and not violated; a horse, was characteristically a horse; a cow, a cow, a dog, a dog; a fish, a fish, and so forth, essentially and characteristically a horse, a cow, a dog, a fish; whereas in the time of Alexander, and after that, in the time of the Roman emperors, the artists then living wandered from the sound path, and attempted to *elevate* nature, by a violation of many of her great principles, and never suffered action or repose to have their due influence, if that influence at all disturbed the *shape* of the figures they represented, or the '*beau ideal*' of the human form they had fixed on in their own minds as a standard of perfection. The figures *then* produced have thus misled the world with false and pernicious

notions of ideal beauty; which were no other than making nature bend to a capricious system, and never bending the system established to the great and eternal laws of nature. The 'ideal beauty' of Phidias was but to restore nature to the essential qualities given her by God.

4. For Haydon and Hazlitt, the "'ideal beauty' of Phidias," means an ideal derived from nature—as represented by the Elgin Marbles. This "natural" ideal is posited against the later Roman, and neoclassical "beau ideal" which would elevate nature, presenting, in Hazlitt's words, the notion of an "*ideal perfection* which never existed in the world, nor even on canvas" (Works, VIII, 144). Haydon's attention to "*shape*," "action," and "repose," and his emphasis upon natural objects cleared of "the results of accident and disease," articulate the central tensions in Keats's ode. I pair students and have them examine the figures represented on the urn. The figures are caught in action: in Bacchic revelry bold lovers pursue "Maidens loth," while a "happy melodist" pipes "songs for ever new." Students are quick to note that, like the Nightingale, these figures represent a realm of beauty, of sensual bliss at its peak, forever beyond the world of flux and sorrow: "All breathing human Passion far above, / That leaves a heart high sorrowful and cloyed / A burning forehead and a parching tongue." While fully natural in expression of active sensual desire, the figures may yet, however, present a "cheat" in that the permanence of their beauty is an atemporal fiction—blissfully freed from time and change, "accident and disease." The question emerges: what is Keats saying here about the truth or fictionality of an ideal of beauty? At this point it is useful, again, to have students review stanza III of the Nightingale ode in relation to the figures on the urn. Ironically, the very pathos of this tension between mortality and an immortal ideal heightens the beauty frozen on the urn. But this is an ideal of beauty not bent to fit a "capricious system," imposed upon the natural, but one that recognizably emerges from the full-blooded experience of human passion in action, caught at its height.
5. The sacrificial procession in stanza IV furthers and deepens this aesthetic dialectic, also engaging the volatile context of pagan religion. Here I introduce students, briefly, to some scholarly commentary on this mysterious stanza. As Ian Jack, in *Keats and the Mirror of Art*, has shown, the stanza's imagery with its "mysterious Priest," and "Heifer lowing at the skies, / And all her silken flanks with garlands drest," derives in part from an Elgin frieze which depicts just such a sacrifice. However, as Robert Gittings has pointed out, it also echoes an article by Haydon. Haydon's article describes and discusses a "Cartoon" (or drawing) by Raphael depicting the "Sacrifice of Lystra," a Biblical scene in which St. Paul, who has just cured a cripple, looks with disdain upon a Priest and procession leading a bull to be sacrificed in gratitude to Paul for his miraculous act of healing. As Gittings notes, Haydon's description of the drawing provides "the garlanded heifer [here a "Bull"], the priest and worshippers, the town emptied of its inhabitants to attend sacrifice, even the players on the sylvan pipes, whom Haydon described as 'wholly absorbed in the harmony of their own music' . . . Even the central theme of the agelessness of art was put in almost the same words by Haydon, who, passing on to the classical statuary of Michaelangelo, remarked that they 'look as if they were above the influence of time; they seem as if they would never grow old, and had never been young'" (*Odes of Keats and their Earliest Known Manuscripts*, 70).
6. Along with these imagistic and thematic influences, the drawing, as described by Haydon, significantly depicts a moment of tension between paganism and Christianity. Haydon quotes the relevant Biblical passage from Acts in which "when the people had seen what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying . . . the Gods are come down to us in the likeness of men." Haydon notes that the apostles were mistaken for Mercury and Jupiter. The passage concludes with the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, rending their clothes and crying, "men why do you do these things? We also are like you, and subject to the same infirmities, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, who made the heaven and earth and the sea, and all things that are in them." Keats would also have relished the populist message in the Biblical passage: the divine power of healing is not imparted directly from

hierarchically superior pagan divinities, but is diffused through the agency of mortals: "We also are like you," cry Paul and Barnabas, "subject to the same infirmities." Students can continue to explore connections. This passage, for example, complements Haydon's discussion (above) of the Phidian ideal in which "a god was only a human being in his highest perfection, with the qualities of a human being restored." For Haydon, again, "the 'ideal beauty' of Phidias was but to restore nature to the essential qualities given her by God." But Keats's attention to the desolation of the town, "emptied" this morning of all its pious inhabitants, may also, in the context of epochal change, lament with Leigh Hunt, in the latter's critiques of the corrupt national church, the passing of such "cheerful" pagan piety, here bound up with the loss of a more "natural" sense of aesthetic beauty. The urn, and the ideal it presents, as the final stanza reminds us, is a relic of antiquity, an "Attic shape."

7. In the final stanza, the "Attic shape" becomes a "fair attitude," a "silent form" that "dost teaze [sic] us out of thought / As doth eternity!" Keats's pronounced attention to "shape" calls up Haydon's key statement concerning the neo-classical aesthetic, which "never suffered action or repose to have their due influence, if that influence at all disturbed the *shape* of the figures they represented, or the '*beau ideal*' of the human form they had fixed on in their own minds as a standard of perfection." Disjoining the "ideal" from the human figure and transposing this to the more purely abstract formal perfection of the urn, Keats quite deliberately "disturbs" that shape, imposing fully the dialectic of "action and repose" upon the "silent form," "with brede / Of marble men and maidens overwrought." At this point, when students are immersed in a multiplex of possible interpretations, it is good to, once again, remind the class of Keats's concept of negative-capability. A complex of double-entendres and puns ("attitude" "brede" "overwrought") climaxes in the poem's crucial paradox, "Cold Pastoral." Keats holds the disjunctive energies of the poem in a tense equipoise: "Perfection," in this dialectic, exists not solely in the permanence of these figures within an ideal work of art, but rather in conjunction with the exacerbating impermanence of the fleeting scene they simultaneously represent and belie. This scene exists forever, paradoxically, as a frozen moment in the history of human passion, framed on this "Attic shape," and captured in the "leaf-fringed legend" of the urn as "Sylvan Historian." The "truth" equated with "beauty" in the poem's concluding lines may be that of a "timeless transcendent," (similar to the neoclassical "beau ideal"), or of the "time-bound" world of natural mortality (as in Hazlitt's and Haydon's verisimilitude—a beauty and truth arising out of nature). Or it may be both simultaneously, hovering in Keatsian negative capability.
8. Introducing students to this kind of contextual reading unsettles without demolishing the idea of the "timeless" classic. By opening up possibilities of interpretation and understanding beyond the boundaries of the work in itself, students begin to see that works of art, particularly hypercanonical works, may give way to a multitude of possible, responsible, readings, dependent on the version of the work one is reading, and in what particular context(s). Indeed the continued hypercanonical status of a work like "Ode on a Grecian Urn" may be owing to the poem's uncanny ability to comply with various readings, to be several works at once.

"Ode on a Grecian Urn": Hypercanonicity & Pedagogy

The Know of Not to Know It: My Returns to Reading and Teaching Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

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1. When James O'Rourke asked me to contribute to this forum, I reacted with a spasm of embarrassment. What could I say that I hadn't said already? Except for some local adjustments, I hadn't fundamentally changed my way of reading or teaching "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in almost 25 years. It was Keats's odes that made me an English major, inspired my doctoral dissertation, shaped my first book. A key concern in one of my first articles was the dynamics of reading "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The poem has always been on my syllabi, not just for Keats's sake, but as a primer of what may be gained by ear industrious and attention meet—those pleasurable labors of careful reading, not as a search for information or an occasion for exposures of ideology, but as a tracking and tracing of language as event, as field of play, as a discovery of indeterminacy in the desire for determinations. My branchings out therefrom have been numerous, infused by gender criticism, new historicism, textual scholarship and theory. All this new growth can still be mapped on to "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and my teaching has developed therefrom, too. At the same time, I have to say, the core is still close-reading, however much the curricula have shifted. Preparatory to writing this essay, I revisited the essays from which I learned how to read this Ode: the incisive description of the dramatic arc in Jack Stillinger's "Imagination and Reality," and the engagements with rhetoric and language in Kenneth Burke's "Symbolic Action," Cleanth Brooks's "Keats's Sylvan Historian: History Without Footnotes," Stuart Sperry's "Romantic Irony," David Perkins's "Keats: The Uncertainties of Vision." I liked these essays as much as I ever did. One thing I'm not embarrassed about is my pleasure in still recommending this lucid, and lucidly debatable, work to my students.
2. I also decided to sit down and reread my reading of the Ode in *The Questioning Presence*, a prospect I faced with wincing apprehension rather than any narcissistic clucking. I articulated this reading in the late 70s and early 80s, when the disorientations of deconstruction were prevailing over the orientations of orthodox new criticism, and when the feminist and new-historicist views of Romanticism and then of Keats that have mattered a great deal to me since were not yet in play. I guess it's the unreconstructed formalist in me, but I found I still like the close reading of poetic events, even if I'd write it up a bit differently now. I'm still impressed by the way Keats mobilizes the ode's linguistic activity—of words, of syntaxes, of poetic forms—to shape for his reader an analogue for his speaker's encounter with the figures and configurations on the urn, an encounter described in projections of desire that fail to tease out a certain or stable legend for understanding. This reflexiveness involves not only a phenomenology of reading (Wolfgang Iser's phrase for the unfolding of meaning and meanings) but also (in ways that don't always interest Iser) ironic relays on the frustrations of reading. The ode's inception in questions leads to a witty interrogative trial of contradictions and, ultimately, an answer that is no answer, but a circular statement ("Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty") that, for all its subsequent canonization, including a chiseling on the walls of the Library of Congress, turns out to be as baffling as the circular urn itself.
3. Without rehearsing the reading in *The Questioning Presence*, I'd like to review a couple of phases that students enjoy puzzling over. I was, and am, interested in the way certain key lines in the ode, about reading as the attention of eye and ear, figure doubly, not only for eye and for ear, but also in the

doubling of urn-reading and ode-reading. In the wake of that initial barrage of questions ("What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape of . . .?"), Keats has the frustrated questioner step back, in a new stanza, to theorize (maybe to ravish) the productivity of its unyielding silence:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone: (11-14)

4. Keats deftly plays these lines past the sensual ear (its pleasures baffled by the atonal, slant rhymes) to the readerly eye: the word *ear* appears folded into *endear'd*, as if to configure, visually, and to echo faintly the audience of an inner ear, more endeared to silence. It matters that this ear-echo is not registered by the first line's rhyme-framing by "Heard . . . unheard," words that contain the spell of *ear* but refuse the sound. To "canopy the heard" (that's how Keats first wrote out this line from Shakespeare's Sonnet 12 in a letter to fellow poet Reynolds; 22 November 1817), Keats puts forth a visual semiotic, a shape of letters. The visual double-play also shapes the other rhyme that refuses to satisfy an ear for harmony: *play on / no tone*. With a preliminary patterning from the "Not to" that frames the front of this qualifying clause (11), the visual text of "no tone" is on the verge of playing (to the eye) "not one." This spell of words isn't the issue of my overworking brain: the verse that follows in this stanza is famously not one, but a sustained equivocation of description ("Though . . . yet . . . / . . . though") about the urn's eternal stasis, in which (male) erotic desire is simulcast both "for ever" and "never never." Not one, but two ways of reading, for ever contradictory and never to be disjoined: this may not be all ye need to know on earth, but in the beholding of the urn, it is all ye know.
5. In a new stanza, Keats has his urn-reader try gamely to shake off this toil of double information by pushing everything--trees, melodist, and especially, lovers--into a "for ever," a "happy, happy" eternity of art. At the same time, Keats himself tunes and tones the verse to suggest urn-reading in overdrive, and plots its accelerating gradations of happiness toward a sharp reverse. This reversal happens in a shift of syntax as much as on the level of cognition. A virtually panting urn-reader depicts the lovers.

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. (27-30)

With considerable syntactic momentum in the phenomenology of reading, the poem-line "All breathing human passion far above" solicits regard as the summary description of the world for ever on the urn. "Breathing" even seems part of the train of participles also involved with breath ("piping," "panting"): All are breathing human passion on a plane far above mortal humanity. OK, the semicolon after "young" (27) seems to mark a syntactic divide; but not necessarily. The stanza's second and fourth lines (" . . . nor ever bid the Spring adieu;" / " . . . songs for ever new;") end in semicolons that register mere pauses to catch one's breath in the heat of ardent pursuit. Two manuscripts (George Keats's and Charles Brown's), moreover, show just a comma after "young." All this tentative punctuation helps credit the sensation, on first looking into the line, that "All breathing human passion far above" is a summary of the developing surmise. Earl Wasserman, for one, never doubted it: "The love is indeed a human passion, and at the same time it is far above all mutable human passion," effecting in the "syntactical oxymoron" an analogue to the "mystic oxymoron" of "mortal and immortal" in synthesis (*The Finer Tone* 39-41). But where he sees Keats stumbling, caught and bewildered in oxymoron, I read a melodious plot: Keats has set up the line up to woo us with the oxymoron Wasserman discerns; then, at the line's turn, pivots its information into the human differential. "Breathing" gets divorced from the company of piping and panting, and gets wed to the ensuing somatics of human passion, "burning" and

"parching," while the possibility of "far above" as a location in imaginative surmise subsides to a sighing recognition of high aesthetic privilege, from which mortal humanity is excluded. This drama of syntactic reorientation plays out for the ode-reader the recognitions that signal the urn-reader's impending disenchantment, and for both, the stage is set for recuperated reading. What is absent "for ever" in urn-worlds is a speaking historian of a particularly poetic cast: "not a soul to tell / Why thou art desolate, can e'er return" (39-40)—the last syllable calling us back, by rhyme, to the title of poet's telling, "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

6. As I reviewed my reading in *The Questioning Presence*, I actually wound up rethinking, refining, revising and rewriting it—an activity that seems to me an extension of, or the promised epiphenomenon of, the dynamics of reading that Keats's ode teaches. Even as my returns to the "Urn" have branched out into gender criticism, new historicism, and textual theory, I've continued to keep company with those for whom reading, by which I mean the close attention that constitutes literary pleasure, remains important. I've become a better reader of *Ode on a Grecian Urn* by reading it with Peter Manning, with Garrett Stewart, with Grant Scott, among others. And I'm more confident about why the Ode matters to me in these lively and productive textures from working out with the oppositional force of Jerome McGann's critiques.
7. These days, I make more than I used to (twenty years ago) of the gender-marking of questioning and interpretation in the spectatorial drama of the Ode: a male poet, the female object he would ravish, the heightening of his aggression, and perhaps disdain, in relation to her refusals. Students (teenagers and twenty-somethings that they are) take well to the invitation to think about reading as an activity energized by desire and prospective satisfaction. I raise some questions from the start: To what degree does a poem such as this require a reader both to play the part of a desiring young man and to imagine the focus of desire as female? What is gained by this gendering? How would the Ode be different if these positions weren't gendered, or differently gendered? How does your agreement to play the male part, even if implicit, unrecognized, untheorized (unfelt, unheard, unseen), affect your sensitivity to the ironies of expectation and effect in the poem's play of language? Do we women read this eroticized drama with more alienation (or theatricalized alterity) than men? Questions about gender are one way of demonstrating how reading is inflected by who is reading, in what sort of circumstance, with what sort of culturally induced habits and expectations. Though the words on the page may be what they were in 1819 or 1820, they can spell out different systems of meaning, new configurations of information, depending on the energies, attentive interests, and even ideological formation of the readers.
8. This is what new-historicist criticism, with a particular vigorous and not always sympathetic focus on Keats, asked us to reflect on. And yet, while I am surely much more historicist than I used to be, the new historicist handling of Keats's odes has had less consequence for me, partly because it has seemed to require a flattening out of ironies and complications—or, if not a flattening, then a consignment to the false consciousness of aesthetic ideology, which (the story goes) purchases these complexities with an evasion of historical contradictions. So even McGann's landmark essay, "Keats and the Historical Method of Literary Criticism," which provocatively situated Keats's aesthetic practices and their history of reception within determinative cultural, social, and especially political contexts, has not really altered what I do with the poem in the classroom. My engagement with questions of "history," in fact, tends to show deconstructive roots. When I first wrote about the Ode, I was caught by the poet's epithet for the Urn, "Sylvan historian"—a historian, as Cleanth Brooks put it in what I still think is one of the best ever essays on the poem, who proceeds "without footnotes." What's at stake (I wondered) in Keats's projection of a chronicler and a mode of chronicle in contradiction to temporality? (That's what history's about: events, a narrative of events.) The Urn emerges from some obscure history, but how can something unspeaking (except perhaps in a summary banality), displaying a static, unchanging tableau, be hailed as a "historian"? When I looked into the etymological history of "history," I

suspected that Keats might not only have anticipated this protest (he's always ahead of his readers this way) but also wanted his readers to think of their engagement as proto-historiographic. *Historia*, I found, comes from a Greek word for "learning or knowing by inquiry," inquiry naming not only the method but also its motive. Historians develop histories from the questions they ask, the questions they're moved to ask, want to ask, burn to ask. The poet who addresses the Urn as a "Sylvan historian" and then, in this opening stanza and stanza IV, produces ten questions himself, is a rival historian, working in a medium of unsylvan rhyme. And since his questions, students tend to see, are simultaneously posed for our interest, we start to think about reading as a mode of questioning, about history as determined by the questions we ask.

9. A reading of the ode as a reflection on history-making was not what the new-historicist "historical method" was after; its focus was on the determinative contextual forces that produce the text and the story of its readings. What this agenda means for the 1820 *Lamia* volume (and its odes) is that Keats—still smarting from the abuse his first two volumes suffered from his association with Hunt as well as his own Cockney insurgency (his outsider bid for legitimacy)—cast "Ode on a Grecian Urn" "not to provoke but allay conflict": it's part of a "reactionary" (by 1819 lights) endeavor "to dissolve social and political conflicts in the mediations of art and beauty" (McGann 53). Not for nothing did Keats shun Hunt's *Examiner* (even Hunt's *Indicator*) to debut his poem in *Annals of the Fine Arts, for MDCCCXIX* (4 [January 1820]: 638-39), edited by his friend B. R. Haydon, noted champion of the British government's acquisition of the Elgin Marbles. When the poem appeared in the *Lamia* volume, its title added a first word, "Ode," that affiliated it with "Ode to a Nightingale" (which it followed), "Ode to Psyche" (which followed it), "Ode" ("Bards of Passion and of Mirth"), a few pages on; "Ode on Melancholy," the last poem of the sub-unit of "Poems"; and even "To Autumn," just before "Melancholy," and evidently an Ode. For McGann, these aesthetic assignments amount to de-politicizing, even anti-politicizing moves. "The ode's urn," he proposes, "is placed before its readers (both past and present) as an ideal example of such vases," the example standing for the idealism of Romantic Hellenism, which understands Greek art as producing "perfect and complete embodiments of a perfect and complete idea of The Beautiful"—an understanding to which the Ode is allied by force of its initial publication in *Annals*, "one of [the] age's chief ideological organs for disseminating such ideas" (44).
10. As interested as I am in the contexts of publication and reception, I have found this containment of the Ode a distortion. If the Ode evokes this ideal, I'm not persuaded that this is the same thing as saying that it is a straightforward example of it: the play of the poetry also frustrates it, ironizes it, maybe even subverts it—possibilities that don't interest McGann except as aspects of the dangerous illusion of aesthetic self-criticism. I always give McGann's bracing critiques to graduate students; but I hesitate to key my undergraduates' discovery of the poetry to his report on *Annals*-ideology, nor, especially, do I want to encourage them to assume (at least not without a struggle) that the Ode is out to embody a perfected ideal, let alone finds that leaf-fringed legend in "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" (45; McGann doesn't quote the *Annals* text, but the *Lamia* one). What I like about Keats's wit here (in my Garrett Stewart mode) is the way "leaf-fringed" slides into "leaf-ringed"—the unknown information "about" the shape of the Ode that is (to me anyway) only desperately, only problematically, translated by the syntactic ringing of "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty."
11. This ringing utterance brings me to my branchings out into textual criticism—an interest related to, but not equivalent to, the historical motivations for textual choices and the history of reading about which McGann cares (it's no coincidence that he is an important editor, too). The textual tangle comes into focus for students (undergraduate as well as graduate) when we get to the famous closing lines that are so launched (49-50). The 1820 *Lamia* volume (whose production Keats was too ill to supervise and so was managed by advisers to his publishers) has lower-cases after the first *Beauty*. The text in *Annals* (which Keats could have supervised) reads:

Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty.—

Although capitalization, especially up through the nineteenth century, might be (usually is) regarded as an "accidental" variant (versus "substantive" variants, of semantic import), such a distinction is dicey to argue here, in the wake of the poem's overt quest for answers, and especially in such a climactic, curtain-lowering event, cast not just as an answer, but *the* answer: has the desiring urn-reader suddenly imagined access to two out of three of the Platonic ideals, as the capitals urge us to think? Or might the lower-casing signify, by evident refusal of this purchase, a modern skepticism, even a hermeneutic mystery? Beyond teasing these capitals, there is the encompassing question of the thirteen words that follow. As if to clarify the rhetorical situation, the hand that guided the *Lamia* volume put only "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" in quotation, with the effect of distinguishing this voice from the one that follows:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. (*Lamia*)

Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty.—That is all
Ye know on Earth, and all ye need to know. (*Annals*)

In this variety, we are left asking, as Jack Stillinger so succinctly put in back in 1958, "Who Says What to Whom at the End of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*?" The poet imagines that the urn "say'st" (48) the bit about beauty and truth, but what of the rest? In his youth, Stillinger summarized the four proposals in the critical literature, each one proffered and debated (poet to reader; poet to urn; poet to the urn's figures; urn to reader).

12. For all this helpful priming, I think Stillinger's cautionary prelude to his anatomy of criticism more to the point: "As to critical interpretation of who says what to whom, no single explanation can satisfy the demands of text, grammar, dramatic consistency, and common sense" (171). And that's what I teach, with a deconstructive spin on issues about textual stability (issues that Stillinger would, in later decades, address with the full force of his scholarship and theoretical smarts). I'm less inclined than Stillinger in 1958, the decade of Eisenhower and "reconciliation"-prone New Criticism, to press for dramatic consistency or to argue common sense (I suspect Stillinger is, now, too), but otherwise, the multiple demands of text, grammar, drama and sense are exactly what I hope students will learn to read by reading the *Ode*, from beginning to end, and then back again, and again. Every time I sit down to read "Ode on Grecian Urn" once again, I find that even if I'm not forever young, the poem is still to be enjoy'd. It promises to sustain reading, when old age shall this generation waste, by its remarkable capacity to generate fresh reviews of what we think we know and to give us new ways of knowing.

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