What happens to people when their gods die, when their belief and faith are dismissed as mere superstitions? A poignant account from recent times is found in Michelle Z. Rosaldo’s report about her experiences among the Ilongot, who live in the Philippines. Until the 1960s a central component of Ilongot culture was the hunting and killing of human beings for their heads. When Rosaldo, having visited the Ilongot once, returned on a second field trip, they asked to listen to recordings of headhunting songs that she had made earlier. Between her trips, missionaries and the government had put an end to headhunting and had suppressed the songs. The Ilongot were eager to hear something of their past, yet once the tape recorder began to play, they could not bear to listen. Rosaldo had not anticipated their reasoning:

Tikbaw [Rosaldo’s Ilongot “brother”] . . . broke into what was a brittle silence, saying he could make things clear. As he put it: “The song pulls at us, drags our hearts, it makes us think of our dead uncle.” And again: “It would be different if I had accepted God, but I am still an Ilongot at heart; and when I hear the song, my heart aches as it does when I must look upon unfinished bachelors whom I know that I will never lead to take a head.”


I am grateful to Marshall Brown and Nicholas Halmi for offering their encouragement and for applying their critical acumen to an early version of this article.
Although the Ilongot had renounced headhunting because it was illegal and contrary to Christian teachings, they could not hide their deep emotional pain when confronted by the memory of what they had lost. Their reaction is easy to grasp, and research on trauma confirms how difficult it is for victims to cope with personal and communal catastrophe.2

Those who attack the belief systems of others, however, tell a different story. Missionaries stress the joy and liberation that converts will feel. The eighteenth-century critics of religion, the deists and atheists, denounced its irrationality, its superstition, and the enthusiasms it aroused, confident that banning it would make the people happier. But giving up a belief in the divine was more difficult than the missionaries of reason understood. Friedrich Schiller in his ode “Die Götter Griechenlands” (“The Gods of Greece”) (1788) voiced the troubled feelings of those who had once believed. Most of the poem depicts a bright, joyful world infused with unquestioned belief in deities, but the concluding stanza sounds a note of desolation now that Christianity has driven them out.3 Although told as the defeat of Greek paganism, Schiller’s story could be regarded as an allegory of the Enlightenment program to instill a regime of scientific reasoning as the precondition for modernization. Progress alone could not heal the wound left by the death of God, any more than it comforted those bereft of earlier gods.

The realization that art could take the place of religion dawned only gradually. The poems and letters of John Keats provide a vivid account of the intense, complex struggle to replace with hope the bleakness of a world deprived of the consolation of faith. Among other things, Keats aimed to resolve a paradox generated by eighteenth-century theories of the sublime. As long as art was supplementary to religion, the sublime served causes such as inculcating respect for God’s majesty and omnipotence. Fear and awe were counterbalanced by wonder, assurance that divine order would prevail, and comfort in the promise of salvation.

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But taken out of a religious context, the sublime aroused intense feelings without compensations. What Keats finally grasped and what he argued in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is that the beautiful, not the sublime, can be a healing influence.

Initially, Keats thought that nature might provide the alternative to a Christianity he could not accept. Such a possibility is intimated in his early sonnet with the frank title “Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition”:

The church bells toll a melancholy round,
   Calling the people to some other prayers,
   Some other gloominess, more dreadful cares,
   More heark’ning to the sermon’s horrid sound.
Surely the mind of man is closely bound
   In some black spell; seeing that each one tears
   Himself from fireside joys, and Lydian airs,
   And converse high of those with glory crown’d.
Still, still they toll, and I should feel a damp,
   A chill as from a tomb, did I not know
   That they are dying like an outburnt lamp;
   That ’tis their sighing, wailing ere they go
   Into oblivion;—that fresh flowers will grow,
   And many glories of immortal stamp.4

The poem has not always been taken seriously; Walter Jackson Bate found “its poetic value meager.”5 The message seems too obvious and would have been offensive to the churchgoing Victorians who determined the canon of Keats’s works. Yet this poem is important as evidence both of Keats’s loss of faith in Christianity and of his search for alternatives. Several points are worth stressing about this sonnet as it relates to “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: the parallel between the worshippers heading to services and the procession in the ode’s fourth stanza,

the tolling bells that tear them from domestic comfort and “Lydian airs” as a religious commemoration tears Keats from his contemplation of the urn, and finally the wavering between the beautiful, represented by flowers, and the sublime, represented by “glories of immortal stamp.” The sonnet proposes that the beautiful and the sublime are complementary grounds for hope.

However, Keats could not sustain his optimism. When he turned his medically trained eyes on the actual world, he saw a nightmare. Nature was filled not with harmony but with rapacious competition, reflecting a cosmic struggle for power and domination. The state of nature appeared to him as Thomas Hobbes had described it, nasty and brutish. In the strange meditative poem addressed “Dear Reynolds, as last night I lay in bed,” Keats summed up his experience of how the sublime intruded on his consciousness:

’Twas a quiet even;
The rocks were silent—the wide sea did weave
An untumultuous fringe of silver foam
Along the brown sand. I was at home,
And should have been most happy—but I saw
Too far into the sea; where every maw
There greater on the less feeds evermore:—
But I saw too distinct into the core
Of an eternal fierce destruction,
And so from happiness I far was gone.

(89–98)

He tried but failed to erase the grim insight through the restorative beauty of flowers:

I’ve gathered young spring-leaves, and flowers gay
Of periwinkle and wild strawberry,
Still do I that most fierce destruction see,
The shark at savage prey—the hawk at pounce,
The gentle robin, like a pard or ounce,
Ravening a worm. (100–105)

To understand why the beautiful leaves and flowers could not overcome fierce destruction, it is necessary to recall eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse. The speaker looking out at the unbounded ocean was vulnerable to the sublime and hence subject to a fixed set of emotional responses: fear, awe, powerlessness, and humility. The catalog of things
that led one to experience the sublime was commonplace by the end of the eighteenth century. “What are the scenes of nature,” asked Hugh Blair in 1783, “that elevate the mind in the highest degree, and produce the sublime sensation? Not the gay landscape, the flowery field, or the flourishing city; but the hoary mountain, and the solitary lake; the aged forest, and the torrent falling over the rock.” Unbounded spaces and geographic features gave rise to this sensation: “The simplest form of external grandeur appears in the vast and boundless prospects presented to us by nature; such as wide extended plains, to which the eye can see no limits; the firmament of heaven; or the boundless expanse of the ocean.”

In 1757 Edmund Burke saw the origins of the sublime in the sensation of pain and the sense of terror that power causes. Because pain overrides pleasure, the sublime must dominate: “The idea of pain, in its highest degree, is much stronger than the highest degree of pleasure. . . . From hence it is, that where the chances for equal degrees of suffering or enjoyment are in any sort equal, the idea of the suffering must always be prevalent.” The emotions aroused by the sublime led to the production of works of art that transmitted those emotions in turn.

Yet Burke and also Kant argued that the sublime so conceived yielded pleasurable side effects, such as relief at not having been annihilated. Others recognized that the imitation of beauty could arouse

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pleasure, delight, and ease. For poets, the desire to achieve the sublime often culminated in attempts at epic. The association between epic and the sublime had been established for the eighteenth century by one of the central theoretical texts in the discourse, the *Peri Hypsous*, attributed to Longinus. Because the sublime had to be characteristic of the greatest poets, Longinus’s analysis frequently drew on Homer, as in the contentious comparison of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. When Burke needed examples of the sublime, he found them in Milton and Virgil. In the controversy about Macpherson’s Ossian poems, Blair took their sublime characteristics as proof that the epic *Fingal* was authentic and then, in a bit of circular argumentation, used them as examples of the sublime: “The gay and the beautiful, will appear to more advantage in the midst of smiling scenery and pleasurable themes. But amidst the rude scenes of nature, amidst rocks and torrents, and whirlwinds and battles, dwells the sublime. It is the thunder and lightning of genius.”

Keats’s familiarity with the traditional connection between the sublime and epic is evident from his “Ode to Apollo,” whose opening stanza blends Homeric and Ossianic themes:

> In thy western halls of gold
> When thou sittest in thy state,
> Bards, that erst sublimely told
> Heroic deeds, and sung of fate,
> With fervour seize their adamantine lyres,
> Whose cords are solid rays, and twinkle radiant fires.

(1–6)

The remaining stanzas list the usual canon of epic poets from Homer to Tasso and epitomize each of them according to aesthetic criteria. Milton appears sublime as the Romantics typified him:

> ’Tis awful silence then again:
> Expectant stand the spheres;
> Breathless the laurel’d peers;


Nor move, till ends the lofty strain,
Nor move till Milton’s tuneful thunders cease,
And leave once more the ravish’d heavens in peace.

(18–23)\textsuperscript{12}

Most Romantic poets, including Wordsworth, Byron, Percy Shelley, Southey, and Blake, aspired to write epic poems. Hence it is not surprising that Keats also wanted to write an epic, the genre that he had come to know as “the king, / Round, vast, and spanning all like Saturn’s ring” (“To Charles Cowden Clarke” [66–67]).\textsuperscript{13} At the same time, he was disturbed by violence, destruction, and war. The dilemma was how to reconcile his nausea at the sublime, as in “the shark at savage prey—the hawk at pounce,” with his professional interests. Thus in \textit{Endymion} the traditional stuff of epic is repudiated:

The woes of Troy, towers smothering o’er their blaze,
Stiff-holden shields, far-piercing spears, keen blades,
Struggling, and blood, and shrieks—all dimly fades
Into some backward corner of the brain.

(8–11)

With the exclamation “Hence, pageant history! hence, gilded cheat!” (14), Keats seems to have discarded the aim of epic grandeur, but later in the work he strives for sublime effects:


On a ridge
Now fareth he, that o’er the vast beneath
Towers like an ocean-cliff, and when he seeth
A hundred waterfalls, whose voices come
But as the murmuring surge. Chilly and numb
His bosom grew, when first he, far away,
Descried an orbed diamond, set to fray
Old darkness from his throne: ’twas like the sun
Uprisen o’er chaos. (239–47)

Significantly, *Hyperion* breaks off just after Apollo undergoes the typical sublime experience:

Knowledge enormous makes a God of me.
Names, deeds, gray legends, dire events, rebellions,
Majesties, sovran voices, agonies,
Creations and destroyings, all at once
Pour into the wide hollows of my brain,
And deify me, as if some blithe wine
Or bright elixir peerless I had drunk,
And so become immortal. (355–62)

Transfigured by the sublime, the god undergoes a violent, painful birth indistinguishable from death; the text ends abruptly with Apollo shrieking. Try as he might, Keats could not block out the agony that produced the sublime. But accepting that he could not do so entailed giving up the attempt to write an epic. That decision was fraught with anxiety about his future as a poet. It is hardly coincidental that his thoughts turned to questions about poetic reputation, as in the pair of sonnets “On Fame.” In “Ode on a Grecian Urn” Keats staked everything on the beautiful, the aesthetic category directly opposed to the sublime. Returning to the struggle of “Dear Reynolds, as last night I lay in bed,” he lets beauty triumph over the sublime and over epic.

Textual links between these two poems have long been noted. Six lines of “Dear Reynolds” stand out for their similarity to the ode’s fourth stanza:

The sacrifice goes on; the pontif knife
Gleams in the sun, the milk-white heifer lows,
The pipes go shrilly, the libation flows:
A white sail shews above the green-head cliff,
Bohm  ■  Ovid and Keats’s “Grecian Urn”

Moves round the point, and throws her anchor stiff.
The mariners join hymn with those on land.

\((20–25)\)

The lines to Reynolds also include the phrase “they tease us out of thought,” with the same equivocation in both poems (77). “Do these lines mean that the harsh actualities of life cannot be overcome by the will or imagination but harass us beyond endurance or solution?” asks Douglas Bush. “Or if, as we might expect, ‘tease us out of thought’ has more or less the same meaning as in the Grecian Urn 44, the rough sense would be: ‘Our dreamings cannot alter actuality but they are a means of escape from it.’” The two texts also share the same metaphor in “sweet music” (“Dear Reynolds,” 62, 65) and “Heard melodies are sweet” (“Ode,” 11). More distantly, the first poem has “silken trim” (56), the second “silken flanks” (34). Yet the thematic links relating these poems to the sublime and to epic remain insufficiently explored. In the rest of this essay I examine the literary contexts that point to the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” as a decisive moment in Keats’s decision to choose the beautiful over the sublime in the context of his philosophy of history.

Intense efforts to understand Keats’s ode have borne considerable fruit. Thanks to Cleanth Brooks, Earl R. Wasserman, and Helen Vendler, among other representatives of the intrinsic approach, the features of Keats’s text have taken on a bewilderingly rich suggestiveness. The extrinsic methods of literary and cultural historians have also yielded

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a wealth of information about the context in which Keats produced the poem. Although there is a consensus that no single vase inspired Keats, it is also clear that he had been looking at and thinking about similar objects.\textsuperscript{17} Casting their nets more widely, critics have shown how debates about the acquisition of the Elgin marbles informed the writing of the poem.\textsuperscript{18}

However, both formalist and historicizing approaches have been stymied by its fourth stanza. Wasserman’s observations typify the puzzle caused by the shift after the opening stanzas:

The priest who leads the procession is doubly mysterious: he is as much without identity as the other figures at heaven’s bourne; and in addition he is to conduct a religious mystery. The sacrificial altar towards which the procession goes is, then, dedicated to heaven, to a realm of pure spirit: the immortal without the mortal, truth without beauty. And the town that the souls leave is the town all souls leave in their human progress toward the heaven-altar. (42–43)

Among the contextualizers, Ian Jack, whose search for sources was so thorough, admitted that the Borghese Vase, which does have the details necessary for the first three stanzas, yields nothing for the fourth (218–19). Bruce Thornton’s argument for the influence of Theocritus’s first idyll represents an advance, though Thornton too finds the fourth stanza puzzling, since there is no sacrificial procession in


the idyll. Nor should there be, since the pastoral hopes to exclude such violence.

What has deflected research from some obvious literary sources such as Theocritus is the lingering sense that Keats was the archetypal Romantic, a poet inspired by things and by nature without the mediation of literature. His detractors at the time mocked what they saw as a Cockney poet’s pretensions to classical learning; even today few readers recognize Keats’s Latin skills. Once old prejudices are set aside, identifying a source for the fourth stanza is relatively straightforward. Pratap Biswas provided a clue, albeit one relegated to a footnote, for he saw “a strikingly similar scene (including altar and heifer) in Ovid.” The reference he made to Amores 3.13 turns out to be, unlike other vague suggestions concerning the Metamorphoses, critically important. Keats’s engagement with Ovid was prolonged and profound. Both Norman Vance and Sarah Annes Brown, coming at the matter from studies of Ovid’s reception, have examined Keats’s awareness of him. Brown unfortunately repeats the baseless notions that Keats’s education “did not equip him to read Ovid in the original with ease” and that he relied primarily on Sandys’s translation. Definitive evidence that Keats did read and understand Ovid in the original is provided by Alice D.


21 Thomas Bayne proposed Metamorphoses 2.1.20 (“Keats’s ‘Grecian Urn’: The Heifer,” Notes and Queries, 10th ser., no. 3 [1905]: 464); E. D. B. Powell came closer to the mark with Amores 3.7.13 (“Marlowe and Keats,” letter to the editor, Times Literary Supplement, April 5, 1947). More recently, Steven Doloff has argued briefly for Ovid’s description of the sacrifice during the Pygmalion episode in the Metamorphoses (“Keats’s Urn and Ovid’s Pygmalion,” Keats-Shelley Review 17 [2003]: 95–97).

Fasano, who concentrates on Keats’s reception of the *Metamorphoses*, specifically his marginal annotations in the Latin text, although she overlooks the connection between the *Amores*, particularly book 3, and Keats’s last odes (Bate, 26, 32).\(^{23}\)

Why Keats would have been drawn to the *Amores* remains a matter for speculation.\(^{24}\) Given his proclivity for etiological topics, it is possible that his interest was piqued by the details provided in *Amores* 3.10 on the history of Ceres, a figure who evidently interested him.\(^{25}\) *Amores* 3.13, focusing on a festival of Juno, is something of a pendant to the festival of Ceres presented in 3.10. But whereas the festival of Ceres is filled with the lightness and gentle humor associated with the goddess of fertility and abundance, the festival of Juno centers on a ritual sacrifice:

\begin{verbatim}
Cum mihi pomiferis coniunx foret orta Faliscis,
     Moenia contigimus victa, Camille, tibi.
Casta sacerdotes Iunoni festa parabunt
     Et celebres ludos indigenamque bovem.
Grande morae pretium cognoscere, quamvis
     Difficilis clivis huc via praebet iter.
Stat vetus et densa praenubilus arbore lucus;
     Aspice, concedes numinis esse locum.
Accipit ara preces votivaque tura piorum,
     Ara per antiquas facta sine arte manus.
Huc, ubi praesonuit sollemni tibia cantu,
     It per velatas annua pompa vias.
\end{verbatim}


\(^{24}\) Robinson mentions a detail made intriguing by the setting of *Amores* 3.13 in Etruria: “Most of the classically Greek urns which were discovered in the 18th Century had been exhumed in Tuscany. For this reason, the antiquarian of Keats’s day held firmly to the mistaken view that such vases were of Etruscan make rather than exports from Greece. Thus if Keats had been writing to an actual Attic urn he would certainly have believed it to be Etruscan” (15 – 16).

Bohm ■ Ovid and Keats’s “Grecian Urn”  

Ducuntur niveae populo plaudente iuvenae,  
Quas aluit campis herba Falisca suis,  
Et vituli nondum metuenda fronte minaces  
Et minor ex humili victima porcus hara  
Duxque gregis cornu per tempora dura recurvo;  
Invisa est dominae sola capella deae:  
Illius indicio silvis inventa sub altis  
Dicitur inceptam destituisse fugam.  
Nunc quoque per pueros icaulis incessitur index  
Et pretium auctori vulneris ipsa datur.  
Qua ventura dea est, iuvenes timidaeque puellae  
Praetexunt latas veste iacente vias.  
Virginei crines auro gemmaque premuntur,  
Et tegit auratos palla superba pedes;  
More patrum Graio velatae vestibus albis  
Tradita supposito vertice sacra ferunt.  
Ore favent populi tum, cum venit aurea pompa,  
Ipsa sacerdotes subsequiturque suas.  
Argiva est pompa facies: Agamemnone caeso  
Et scelus et patrias fugit Halaesus opes  
Iamque pererratis profugus terraque fretoque  
Moenia felici condidit alta manu.  
Ille suos docuit Iunonia sacra Faliscos:  
Sint mihi, sint populo semper amica suo.26

Christopher Marlowe’s translation, which Keats could certainly have known, runs as follows:

*De Junonis festo.*

When fruite-fild Tuscia should a wife give me,  
We toucht the walls, Camillus, wonne by thee.  
The priests to Juno did prepare chaste feasts,  
With famous pageants, and their home-bred beasts.  
To know their rites, well recompenc’d my stay,  
Though thether leades a rough steepe hilly way,  
There stands an old wood with thick trees darke clouded,  
Who sees it graunts some deity there is shrowded.  
An Altar takes mens incense, and oblation,  
An Altar made after the ancient fashion.  
Here, when the Pipe with solemne tunes doth sound,

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The annuall pompe goes on the covered ground.
White Heifers by glad people forth are led,
Which with the grasse of Tuscan fields are fed,
And calves from whose feard front no threatenng flyes,
And little Piggs base Hog-sties sacrifice,
And Rams with hornes their hard heads wreathed back.
Onely the Goddesse hated Goate did lack,
By whom disclosed, she in the high woods tooke,
Is said to have attempted flight forsooke.
Now is the goat brought through the boyes with darts,
And given to him that the first wound imparts.
Where Juno comes, each youth, and pretty maide,
Shew large wayes with their garments there displayed.
Jewels, and gold their Virgin tresses crowne,
And stately robes to their gilt feete hang downe.
As is the use, the Nunnes in white veyles clad,
Upon their heads the holy mysteries had.
When the chiefe pompe comes, lowd the people hollow,
And she her vestall virgin Priests doth follow.
Such was the Greeke pompe, Agamemnon dead,
Which fact, and country wealth Halesus fled,
And having wandered now through sea and land,
Built walles high towered with a prosperous hand.
He to th’Hetrurians Junoes feast commended,
Let me, and them by it be aye be-friended.27

Key details of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” are present in Ovid’s poem: the altar, the priests, the heifer, the townspeople. The description of “silken flanks with garlands drest” (34) picks up on the costuming of the youths in the profession. The “peaceful citadel” (36) recalls the “walles high towered with a prosperous hand” (Moenia felici condidit alta manu). More compelling than the details in isolation is the whole they make. The narrative situation is the same. Both speakers are observers, not participants, who suddenly enter the scene of a religious procession whose culmination is intimated but not described. In both

cases the ritual involves the entire population of the smallish town. The sacrifice takes place at an ancient “green altar” (32) in a grove outside the town, not at a modern temple. The priest is mysterious in that he is an initiate of the cult of the goddess, like the “chiefe pompe” and the “vestall virgin Priests.” However, the last three lines of Keats’s fourth stanza have no correspondence in Ovid’s poem. In them Keats anticipates the town’s destiny and sums up a complex historical sequence that needs to be reviewed at length in conjunction with Ovid’s argument about Roman history.

But before turning to that point, I want to remark one last structural similarity between the two poems. Ovid ends with a formulaic wish: “Let me, and them by it be aye be-friended” (Sint mihi, sint populo semper amica suo). Keats imitates this move by closing his poem with a famous benediction: “‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (49–50). It will become evident that the enunciation of beauty’s triumph is directed against the invocation of Juno as a benefactress.

*Amores* 3.13 seems out of keeping with the tone and themes of the elegies preceding it, particularly in its complex engagement with time and chronology.28 Real time is invoked at the outset when the narrator frames the story by referring to an actual trip undertaken by actual people for actual reasons. Whether or not this narrator is Ovid speaking autobiographically may remain moot.29 What matters is how the device implicates the poem in the historical process set in motion with the mention of Camillus, who according to Livy conquered the town in 394 BC.30 Thus the narrator’s experiences are grounded in public as well as in private history.


29 On the necessity of distinguishing the author from the narrator in Ovid’s works see Robert M. Durling, *The Figure of the Poet in Renaissance Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 26–43; and John T. Davis, *Fictus Adulter: Poet as Actor in the “Amores”* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1989).

The shift to the scene of the ritual complicates the historical chronology. The narrator is observing an event both within the historical framework and outside it. The sacred time of rituals always transcends history. In the community far from the Roman center, time has moved more slowly and people have preserved their ancient customs. As they celebrate the festival of Juno, they reenact a performance that first took place long before their and the narrator’s present. The poem’s final lines remind readers how historical events have developed since the ritual began: the Trojan War has ended, Agamemnon has returned home and been killed, and one of his illegitimate sons, Halaesus, has fled to avoid being murdered as well. Halaesus has landed in Etruria and founded Falerii. It is a deft ironic touch that the founding of the city is mentioned at the end of a poem that opens with a reference to the end of its autonomy, so that the chronicle moves back in time, just as the visit to the rural town has brought the narrator back to an originating moment.

The last line returns to the present and makes an appeal that extends into the future. According to Leslie Cahoon, this wish represents Ovid’s hope for the restoration of an uncorrupted civic virtue embodied in the reverence of the benevolent Juno, who was associated with marriage and fertility. Two factors speak against such a reading. First, there is the allusion to Juno’s attempted flight, presumably an occasion that ended with her rape by her brother and future spouse, Jupiter. The rape inscribed violence into Juno’s attitude and contaminated all human intercourse with the traces of masculine force. Juno’s enduring resentment is signaled by the fact that she will not abide the presence of goats in celebrations, as they are reminders of her capture and humiliation. This Juno is both vengeful and jealous. Her malevolence is reinforced by the second factor, her role as implacable foe of the Trojans and hence ambivalent patron of the Romans. Halaesus,
who brought the worship of Juno with him to Falerii, was also known from the *Aeneid* as an enemy of the Trojans and was therefore loyal to Juno twice over.\(^3^4\) As the founder of a city dedicated to her, he was an antithesis to Aeneas, the founder of Rome under the auspices of Venus. As a defender of Italy against the Trojans, Halaesus served the cause of Juno directly.\(^3^5\) The trip to Falerii therefore raises the memory of ancient conflicts that have not been resolved. Lurking somewhere, perhaps in a distant provincial town, perhaps in the intricacies of ritual, perhaps in the mundane brutality of men to women, is the potential for a resumption of Juno’s campaigns against the Romans. Far from being out of place in the *Amores*, this elegy exposes the occluded histories of gods and mortals that have transformed relations between men and women into unending warfare.\(^3^6\)

The strongest reminder of the violence that lurks beneath the veneer of civilization is the blood sacrifice that is the climax of Juno’s ritual. The details are left to the reader’s imagination. By contrast, in the *Metamorphoses* animal sacrifice is described vividly to disgust readers and to persuade them to reject such barbarous practices:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Nec satis est quod tale nefas committitur; ipsos} \\
\text{inscripsero deos sceleri numenque supernum} \\
\text{caede laboriferi credunt gaudere iuuenci.} \\
\text{uictima labe carens et praestantissima forma} \\
\text{(nam placuisse nocet) uittis insignis et auro}
\end{align*}
\]


\(^3^5\) As Lenz asks rhetorically in his commentary, “With what sentiments will Augustus, the descendant of Aeneas, have read the praise of Halaesus?” (Ovid, *Die Liebeslegien*, 256, note to line 31).

sistitur ante aras auditque ignara precantem
imponique suae uidet inter cornua fronti
quas coluit fruges percussaque sanguine cultros
inficit in liquida prauios forsitan unda.
protinus ereptas uivuenti pectore fibras
inspiciunt mentesque deum scrutantur in illis.

[But not content with such wicked behaviour, men choose to involve
the gods themselves in their guilt. They reckon the powers of heaven
are filled with delight when a loyal, hard-working bullock is slaughtered.
A victim unblemished and perfectly formed (its beauty its downfall),
adorned with ribbons and gold on its horns, is set by the altar.
It listens to prayers which it can’t understand and can feel the sprinkling,
between the horns of its forehead, of barley it helped produce.
Its throat is cut and the blood urns on to the knife, whose reflection
the animal may already have seen in the lustral water.
The priests move quickly to snatch and inspect the lungs from the throbbing
breast of the victim, in order to scan the purpose divine.]37

Keats surely recalled this passage when writing to Reynolds about the gleam of the pontif knife. But it must be collated with similar scenes from the Metamorphoses, as well as from Amores 3.13, as Keats conflated them. Their common thread is the white heifer, the innocent sacrificial victim. Early in the Metamorphoses the horror of the connection between sacrifice and the jealous wrath of Juno is presented through the story of Io, whom Jupiter turned into a calf when Juno became suspicious that he had had an affair with her. The twist in the plot arises from what does not happen to Io: she is not killed in a sacrifice but is restored to human form. It is left to the reader to imagine what it would have been like for Io, fully aware of her identity but unable to tell anyone who she

was if she had been selected to be ritually slaughtered, to fulfill Juno’s desire for revenge. In this light, the gender of the sacrificial animal in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” takes on a contextual necessity that coincides with Froma I. Zeitlin’s analysis of the masculine violence in Keats’s poem: “While the piety of ritual would seem furthest removed from the wild ecstasy of the first stanza and sacrificial death utterly antithetical to erotic passion, the heifer victim connects the two in an associative subliminal bond of potential violence to which the feminine body is perpetually subject.” What still needs to be established is that in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” Keats opposed rather than supported an aesthetics based on sacrifice, whatever the gender of the victims might be.

The alternative to a world governed by violence and slaughter is represented by the reign of Ceres. Under her rule, innocent cattle do not become prey to human carnivores. The opposition between the festivals of Ceres and Juno, summarized in Amores 3.10 and 3.13, grounds two different worlds. One is the world variously known as the bucolic, the idyllic, and the pastoral. The other, based on hunting and killing, is the heroic, or epic, world. In “Ode on a Grecian Urn” the former is the realm of the beautiful, and the latter is under the dominion of the sublime.

Without Amores 3.13 as a source, the two scenes in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” appear complementary. The ready assumption has been that because they are in the same poem, they are also depicted on the same Greek vase, despite the considerable contortions required to reconcile them with each other. If Keats drew on different sources for the scenes, the opposition between them comes more clearly into focus. The fourth stanza is a drastic alternative to the happiness and joy of the lovers’ frolics. The situation of the first three stanzas descends from the pastoral


world of Theocritus’s first idyll. Human history has not yet reached the stage of separation between divine and mortal beings; it is not yet possible to distinguish “deities or mortals,” “men or gods” (“Ode,” 6, 8). Time will be frozen on the urn in a stasis of pure passion. In drastic contrast, the fourth stanza opens a rupture through which history enters, quoted from *Amores* 3.13, initiating a chronicle of violence that will continue down to Keats’s own present. With the introduction of Juno, epic displaces pastoral. The freedom of dancing is replaced by the orders of the procession and the sacrifice; unlimited happiness yields to violent desolation. Pastoral may seem cold when measured by the sublime energy of epic history; the energy keeping the world green is gentle rather than urgent. Can the beautiful object resist the economy that continually replenishes itself through the sacrifice of living beings? The urn is a relic that has avoided becoming a victim in the historical process. As a “still unravish’d bride” (1), it has not yet shared Juno’s fate. Important in this regard are the political implications of the choice of the urn for ekphrasis. Unlike the shields of Achilles and Aeneas, epic’s paradigmatic objects for ekphrasis, sublime in their cosmic imagery, the urn has no military purpose or history. Nor does it depict violent conflict (Brown, 146–47). The second stanza echoes the story of Daphnis and Apollo, but there is a critical difference between the history of Daphnis and that of Juno. Daphnis will not be violated: “Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss, / Though winning near the goal” (17–18).

As an alternative to the sublime, the urn must renounce the economy of sacrifice on which the progress of epic was founded. The renunciation happens on two planes simultaneously. The economy of sacrifice requires that the material substratum of signification, that which bears the sign, must be annihilated so that the sign may become transcendental. As a material object, the urn will not be destroyed, unlike

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the heifer. At the end of the ritual, the heifer, “all her silken flanks with garlands drest,” will no longer exist, having been sublimated as a demonstration of fealty to the goddess. By contrast, the urn works as an aesthetic object preserved so that it may continue to produce its effects, to “tease us out of thought.” To quote Stuart Curran’s incisive comment, the urn is “a kind of energy, drawing us out of ourselves, constantly in the process of redefinition.”

The urn cannot legitimate the economy of sacrifice in what and how it represents. The beautiful does not result from suffering, so there is no longer any need for Keats to find ways to transform the pain of the sublime into the pleasure of the beautiful. The urn produces meaning by converting the two ideals of truth and beauty, back and forth, in ceaseless reciprocity. The dialectic makes beauty into truth, truth into beauty, beauty into truth, and so on endlessly, without sacrificing either for the other. Even the war between the sexes, the dominant theme of the Amores, is no longer joined. Ideal love, like the unheard melodies (“Ode,” 11), will be “sweeter” because it does not become part of the actual realm where lovers quarrel, hurt each other, and eventually die. It is consistent with the refusal to represent sacrifice, even in love, that the figures are anonymous. No real couple has been transformed into lifeless forms to serve the purposes of art. By grounding beauty and truth reciprocally in each other, Keats establishes an alternative to the sublime economy. The self-sustaining economy of beauty as truth is based on the model of the unlimited energy of cosmic flux presented by Ovid in the Metamorphoses right after the denunciation of sacrifice. Those who sacrifice other beings do not understand that everything is continually transformed into everything else: “Nihil est toto quod perstet in orbo; / cuncta fluunt; omnisque uagans formatur imago” (In the whole of the world there is nothing that stays unchanged. / All is in flux. Any shape that is formed is constantly shifting) (15.177–78). In other words, the effort to grasp the world via ideal images is empty and immoral: empty because both the world and the images continu-

ally shift, immoral because matter is forcefully dominated by arbitrary forms. Sacrifices imitate the violent assault of forms on matter. The violence of sacrifice disrupts the divine economy to produce what are supposed to be realities, substantial presences, but turn out to be deceptions, since they exhaust the cosmic economy. Similarly, violent deeds committed in epic struggle may produce a momentary sublime, but they eventually lead to exhaustion. Beauty, however, creates an unlimited surplus in the dialectic interaction with the truth, the irreducible being, of the world. The excess of beauty coincides with the economy of pastoral, where abundance is the rule. Not Juno but Ceres supplies the abundance that is sufficient for all needs, as Keats argues more directly in “To Autumn.”

But England in 1819 was far from accepting the priority of beauty. Keats was well aware that his was still an age of epic, characterized by the violent sacrifice of innocent and helpless beings. All things seemed inextricably caught in an economy where beautiful surfaces bore the traces of suffering, hidden by layers of commerce. Shimmering pearls and soft furs were marked by histories of pain, as Keats wrote in “Isabella”:

For them the Ceylon diver held his breath,
   And went all naked to the hungry shark;
For them his ears gush’d blood; for them in death
   The seal on the cold ice with piteous bark
Lay full of darts. (113 – 17)

Even objects of art were appropriated to the needs of epic in Keats’s time. The acquisition of the Elgin marbles by the British was integral to imperial ambitions that continued those of the Romans.\[43\] That continuity is revealed in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” through the allusion to Ovid’s elegy. Ovid had taken epic history from its mythical beginnings to the Trojan War through the conquest of Italy into his own present. Keats picked up the thread at the end of Ovid’s poem in “Dear Reynolds, as last night I lay in bed.” Just as the sacrifice is taking place, the sacri-

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\[43\] Not enough attention has been paid to the fact that the Elgin marbles had been “ravished,” carried off by the British out of Greece. They were also visibly “ravaged” by time. By contrast, the urn has not been dislocated and remains intact.
fice that goes untold in *Amores* only to be related in the *Metamorphoses*, a ship appears in Keats’s poem:

The pipes go shrilly, the libation flows:
A white sail shews above the green-head cliff,
Moves round the point, and throws her anchor stiff.
The mariners join hymn with those on land.

These mariners are descended from Halaesus, who transmitted the cult of Juno from Greece to the Italian peninsula. The westward course of empire is accompanied by the deities who inspired the Trojans, the Romans, and finally the British. It is no coincidence that, as Paul Fry points out, the silence of the Spanish conquistadores in “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” indicates how they have been overcome by the sublime of the Pacific Ocean (203–5).

The progress of empire abandons each previous center, which then falls into ruin. Ovid knew that Greece and Troy had been superseded by Rome; in Keats’s time the idea that the British Empire had supplanted the Roman was generally accepted. The succession of imperial power writes large the moment of sacrifice with which epic history began, as each civilization is offered up in turn. Fittingly, the fate of the little town is tinged with the sublime:

And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e’er return.
(“Ode,” 38–40)

The absolutes of “evermore,” “not a soul,” and “e’er” are instances of the infinite that would arouse sublime emotions. For English readers, the “desolation” of little towns was also linked with the history of British colonial expansion, whose impact had been recounted in Oliver Goldsmith’s “Deserted Village” (1770):

Sweet smiling village, loveliest of the lawn,
Thy sports are fled, and all thy charms withdrawn;
Amidst thy bowers the tyrant’s hand is seen,
And desolation saddens all thy green.44

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Goldsmith’s account blamed the destruction of the English countryside, filled with quiet beauty, on the remorseless greed that drove commerce and empire:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{But times are alter’d; trade’s unfeeling train} \\
\text{Usurp the land and dispossess the swain;} \\
\text{Along the lawn, where scatter’d hamlets rose,} \\
\text{Unwieldy wealth, and cumbrous pomp repose.}
\end{align*}
\]

(63–66)

Social and economic injustice drove common people into exile to the distant reaches of the empire, where they sought a better life. All of this would have been fresh in Keats’s mind when he wrote “Ode on a Grecian Urn” after his brother George had emigrated to the United States in 1818. The economic and social forces that had originated before the Trojan War were still driving people westward, out of their pleasant land.

Those who hope to correct injustice must have an ideal to propose as an alternative. Once upon a time, it was proposed by the gods or by God, but after they had passed out of existence, that too became unavailable. Several poets advocated the sublime as the final arbiter of justice. Shelley called on Mont Blanc to provide a sublime alternative to the corruption of society:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal} \\
\text{Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood} \\
\text{By all, but which the wise, and great, and good} \\
\text{Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel.}
\end{align*}
\]

(80–83)\textsuperscript{45}

Similarly, in “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage” Byron contrasted the truth and power of the sublime ocean with the pretensions of British imperialism and its boast that “Britannia rules the waves”:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean—roll!} \\
\text{Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain;} \\
\text{Man marks the earth with ruin—his control} \\
\text{Stops with the shore. (4.159)}
\end{align*}
\]


Wordsworth too sought in the sublime a corrective for the flaws of a society alienated from nature and cramped in urban spaces.\footnote{47}

Keats had thought that the sublime might be the agent for reform, but once he grasped that the sublime was itself based on domination and destruction, he opted for the beautiful as the only alternative. The Grecian urn represents the measure by which the sublime and all of epic history may be judged and found wanting. The beautiful, which is true in the sense that a carpenter’s level or a plumb line is true, provides unerring guidelines for building sound social structures. That was the sense in which Shaftesbury had argued that

when we see, in the issue, what Riot and Excess naturally produce; when by Luxury’s means, and for the service of vile Interests, Knaves, we see, are advanc’d, and the vilest of Men are prefer’d before the honestest; we then behold VIRTUE in a new Light, and by the help of such a Foil, can discern the Beauty of Honesty. . . .

AND thus, after all, the most natural Beauty in the World is Honesty, and Moral Truth. For all Beauty is Truth. True Features make the Beauty of a Face; and true Proportions the Beauty of Architecture; as true Measures that of Harmony and Musick.\footnote{48}

To function as a standard, beauty must not be caught up in temporality. The beautiful urn is not subsumed in the sublime; it has not been seized by the history of epic but endures parallel to history. The paradox of the relationship is caught in the oxymoron of the “still unravish’d bride.” To be unravished is to be unraped, but it is also to be unsublimated, not overwhelmed by the power of the sublime. The unravished urn has not been torn away from the ground of its origin and carried off from potentiality into the actuality of history. As it always remains potential, its ideal existence will continue to provide the alternative to the order of the sublime. Keats was shrewd enough to know that the world of epic history would continue, bringing later generations “other woe” (“Ode,” 47), but the simple constancy of beauty was all that would be needed to right the world.


The affinity of Keats’s closing lines with the passage quoted from Shaftesbury reflects the deep roots of his choice of beauty in the English conviction that improving taste was the key to improving civil society. Unlike German idealism, whose aesthetic norms were to be imposed on society by enlightened rulers and thereby would perpetuate the violence of the sublime, the English model relied on drawing individuals to higher standards of appreciation and hence to more polite, honest, and virtuous behavior. Those exposed to beauty would gradually internalize a sense for perfection and harmony. The process is encapsulated in the pun in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” that links the “Attic shape” with “fair attitude” (41). Minds formed by the graceful proportions of the beautiful object will become imbued with a sense of fairness, at once beautiful and just. The culmination of this transformation is expressed by Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of Keats’s closest readers:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same: Deads out that being indoors each one dwells; Selves—goes itself: myself it speaks and spells, Crying What I do is me: for that I came.

Í say more: the just man justices; Keeps gráce: thát keeps all his goings graces.

The future in which all beings may body forth their inner beauty and let justice shine in their deeds has not yet arrived, but Keats glimpsed it and shared the vision.

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