

5-22-2016

“A Shadow of a Magnitude”: The Condition of Artwork in John Keats’s Ekphrastic Poetry

John Anderson Kneisley
Dickinson College

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.dickinson.edu/student_honors

Recommended Citation

Kneisley, John Anderson, “A Shadow of a Magnitude”: The Condition of Artwork in John Keats’s Ekphrastic Poetry” (2016).
Dickinson College Honors Theses. Paper 254.

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Dickinson Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator.
For more information, please contact scholar@dickinson.edu.

“A Shadow of a Magnitude”: The Condition of Artwork in John Keats’s Ekphrastic Poetry

By: John Anderson Kneisley

Senior Thesis

Dickinson College Department of English

Professor Gregory Steirer

April 22, 2016

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing is a social practice. It's a hard thing to remember sometimes, especially when sequestered in empty academic buildings at odd hours of the night. But I could not have written this thesis without the help of many people. Writing was less lonely because of your generosity and support.

First, I must thank my 404 classmates. Your steady supply of encouragement, constructive feedback, and friendship made the writing process feel larger than myself. I would not trade that perspective for anything, and I'm so grateful to have grown alongside you this year. I also want to thank my extended family of tutors at the Writing Center for being an unbelievable support group, for being willing to talk about *anything*, and for always being there. Literally. There was always someone in that room.

Greg, I can't possibly summarize how helpful you were. Thank you, first of all, for structuring 403/404 the way you did. Being able to explore my own field while learning about the big picture of humanities scholarship was the best possible backbone for the spring. Thank you also for constantly pushing me towards "negative capability," often against my will, by telling me to embrace literature's ambiguities. I promise I'll get there eventually! Thank you for Simmons, Plato, Heidegger, Woolf, Hillman, and Nietzsche (I still need to read Nietzsche). But more than anything, and I cannot emphasize this strongly enough, thank you for your entirely selfless and down-to-earth approach to teaching. Without sacrificing any of its intellectual rigor, you make academia feel human.

To Professor Nichols, thank you for so graciously taking me under your wing in an independent study on Keats and Shelley this semester. Your kind and scrupulous attention to my ideas, whether spoken or written, was not only valuable to my thesis, but also to my overall growth as a writer and thinker. And while I'm grateful for your knowledge and expertise on Romantic poetry, I'm even more grateful for your passion for it. Being able to share that passion with you in many a conversation made this year more than worthwhile.

To Professor Seiler, thank you for helping me realize the unlimited potential of close reading. No other course or professor has taught me to be as attentive to language. I hope that my work can in some small way reflect what I learned from you. Thank you also for helping me wade through my foggy thoughts throughout the year. Your clarity, acumen, and willingness to help in whatever way possible are all so admirable and extraordinary.

To professors Sider Jost, Kersh, and Johnston, thank you for generously providing feedback on my ideas and for recommending wonderful things to read. You all were of far more help to me than you might think.

To Professor Schlitt, thank you for your course on Michelangelo and for helping me think about ekphrasis in the context of his work. Thank you also for teaching me how to apply my close reading skills to visual art. Studying a master of sculpture proved an unusually strong foundation to studying a master of poetry. But I think now that they both practiced the same art.

To Professor Jim Heffernan, thank you for your correspondence about ekphrasis and for pointing me in the right direction when I was lost.

To Mary, thank you for telling me that there was, in fact, a word to describe poetry written about artworks. You unlocked the door I found.

And lastly, but most importantly, thank you, Mom, for encouraging and supporting me the whole way. I'm certain that I would never have been able to fall in love with literature if you hadn't shown me what love meant first.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface: A Return to “Ekphrasis”6

Exhibit One: The Grecian Urn.....13

Exhibit Two: The Elgin Marbles.....18

Exhibit Three: The Fallen Titans.....28

Conclusion: The “Poet-Painter”.....39

Works Cited.....42

Works Consulted.....45

On the night of February 3rd, 1820, John Keats suffered a pulmonary hemorrhage in his Hampstead home. After a horrific coughing fit, he looked down to see a red stain on his bed sheets. He declared at once: “I cannot be deceived in that colour. That drop of blood is my death warrant. I must die” (*Letters*, 276). Keats was more than familiar with the symptoms of tuberculosis. Not only had he been a medical student at Guy’s Hospital in London, but both his mother, Frances, and his younger brother, Thomas, perished from the illness (Gittings 81). The sight of blood heightened his long-held anxiety over death’s imminence and over failing to leave behind a poetic oeuvre worth enshrining.¹ The twenty-four year old would have approximately one more year to live. As both his time and his physical condition waned, Keats lost all confidence in his poetry and retracted his earlier claim that he would “be among the English poets” when he died, writing to his longtime love, Fanny Brawne: “I have left no immortal work behind me—nothing to make my friends proud of my memory” (*Letters*, 263). On his deathbed, the man who would later become one of England’s most revered poets thought himself too young and unaccomplished to deserve an enduring legacy.

During his illness, Keats was so certain of being forgotten that he directed his close friend, Joseph Severn, to carve the following words on his gravestone: “Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water.” The epitaph conveys both initial invisibility and later erasure. A name written in water is not only immediately transparent, but is also subject to evaporation, a phenomenon suggested by the past tense “was writ” as if the name faded out of existence. Although the grave also labels its occupant a “Young English Poet,” Keats’s name does not appear. The memorial thereby attempts to undo Keats’s memorialization. Whereas most gravestones preserve a specific identity upon their surface, Keats’s gravestone preserves the loss

¹ One example of Keats’s explicit identification of this anxiety is his sonnet, “When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be.”

of one. This undoing ultimately fails, however, because of the continued veneration of Keats's poetry, its fame able to restore his name's association with the stone. But without his celebrated legacy, the memorial might remain a paradox; upon seeing it, we would remember nothing but the disappearance of a young poet's name. Rather than aid viewers in an act of remembrance, Keats's gravestone stands in permanent forgetfulness and thereby reverses the traditional purpose of a memorial artifact.

The gravestone's resistance to commemoration, although influenced by Keats's terminal condition, is not unlike his poetic treatment of Classical relics. Keats wrote several poems about ancient Greek sculptures, a subject that grew in popularity throughout the literary community during the first exhibition of the Elgin marbles in the British Museum.² But in contrast to other poets' celebratory responses to the newly acquired artwork, Keats is sensitive to the sculptures' loss of an ability to be recognized. For Keats, even the aged figures' visibly in-tact features have become less decipherable over time, their meaning lost along with the context of ancient Greece. In his poems, Keats's speaker often grows anxious when highlighting these figures' deterioration as if their mysterious and broken bodies reflect his own potential failure to endure. Keats's attention to the artworks' impermanence thus resembles his grim prescription upon his gravestone. Although Keats's perspective near death may at first seem disconnected from his bountiful poetic career, his grave's anti-memorial sentiment can lead to a better understanding of him not just as a poet, but as an unusually sensitive critic and historian of Classical art.

² The Elgin (or Parthenon) marbles are a collection of ancient Greek marble sculptures from the Athenian Acropolis taken to Great Britain by Lord Elgin and his art restoration crew in the early 19th-century. The circumstances of the marbles' transportation ignited controversy, and their rightful ownership remains disputed to this day. In Exhibit Two, I will address the marbles' acquisition to provide context to Keats's poetry. Should the reader wish a fuller account of the marbles' history, I recommend William St. Clair's *Lord Elgin and the Marbles* as an illuminating and detailed narrative of the marbles' origin, transportation, and later exhibition in the British Museum.

Preface: A Return to “Ekphrasis”

Before engaging in a study of Keats’s poetry on Classical art, we must first identify the major rhetorical tradition in which it participates. That tradition is ekphrasis. The term’s use evolved considerably during the Romantic period, yet its roots in ancient Greece are foundational to understanding Keats’s verse. Stemming from the Greek *ekphrazein*, which means “to speak out” or “to tell in full,” Classical ekphrasis indicates a vivid description of an artwork (Hagstrum 18). Its etymology suggests the act of giving voice or language to a silent art object, thereby forming a bridge between visual and verbal mediums. For Andrew Becker, the goal of Classical ekphrasis “is to make language a window” through which the audience might “view” such an object (Becker 25). To illustrate one of the earliest examples of ekphrasis, I offer Homer’s description of the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*. Homer first describes the shield’s “three-fold circle,” a sequence of wide rings beginning in the device’s center and extending outward to its perimeter (Homer, II. 482). He then describes how each ring contains an assortment of images, which include natural landscapes, celestial bodies, depictions of both upper and working class life, and scenes from Greek mythology. Because the shield is so elaborate and requires many lines to describe, Homer’s ekphrasis functions as a pause in the epic’s central narrative. For Homer, it is the shield’s turn to narrate, or “speak out,” and he is thus able to create “a window” to the exact image of the artwork.

Come the Romantic period, ekphrasis was characterized less by long, precise descriptions and more by short, abstract ones, often taking the form of individual poems. Instead of creating “a window” to a detailed image, the Romantics used ekphrasis to convey a speaker’s moving encounter with an artwork. One exemplary Romantic ekphrastic poem is Wordsworth’s sonnet, “Upon the Sight of a Beautiful Picture, Painted by Sir G.H. Beaumont.” With the words “Upon

the Sight of,” Wordsworth signals that his poem is about a response to Beaumont’s painting more so than the image itself, which he vaguely titles “a Beautiful Picture.” Rather than describe the painting in precise detail, Wordsworth describes the artwork as “soul-soothing” to the speaker, who throughout the poem reacts blissfully to the painting’s ability to preserve “a brief moment” in the “calm of blest eternity” (II. 13, 14). For James Heffernan, the speaker’s positive reaction “originates chiefly with the birth of the public museum,” where visitors had the opportunity to meditate upon and appreciate a host of artworks for the first time (93). Although Keats will later express anxiety over artworks’ failure to suspend a moment in “blest eternity,” we see exemplified in Wordsworth the Romantic tendency to prioritize the act of confronting an artwork over that artwork’s appearance.

Despite the prevalence of ekphrastic poetry in the Romantic period, only a small percentage of critics associate Keats’s poetry with the ekphrastic tradition. One reason could be that because Keats’s poems are so individually revered, critics resist grouping them together within a specific category. However, scholarship concerning Keats’s and other Romantics’ general fascination with art is plentiful. Among the earliest is Stephen Larrabee’s survey titled *English Bards and Grecian Marbles* (1943). Although his study includes every major English Romantic poet, Larrabee dubs Keats “the most ‘Greek’” for achieving a highly intimate relationship with Classical sculptures (206). For Larrabee, Keats became “intoxicated with the beauty of their forms,” a sentiment the critic draws out from “Ode on a Grecian Urn” as well as from the longer “Endymion” (214). Even “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” a poem rife with personal anxiety, is, for Larrabee, a wistful reaction to not being able to witness “the original magnitude of the beauty manifest in the Parthenon” (212). Larrabee thereby characterizes Keats’s overall collection of sculptural poetry as a celebratory ode to ancient Greece. But despite

situating Keats and the sculptures in such close proximity, Larrabee not once mentions ekphrasis, an omission that may have influenced later critics to explore the broader thematic implications, rather than the rhetorical mode, of Keats's marble-inspired verse.

To offer just two important examples of this trend that ignores ekphrasis, Alan Bewell and A.W. Phinney each use one of Keats's poems about sculpture to make a larger claim about history and art. In a reading of *Hyperion*, Keats's unfinished epic that recounts the Greek myth of the Titans' fall to the Olympian gods, Bewell argues that Keats's sympathy for the Titans' weakened condition characterizes the poem as a critique on colonial expansion. Bewell compares the Titans, who Keats describes as fragmented statues, with the ruined artifacts acquired from Napoleon's 1798 military campaign in Egypt (II. 22). For Bewell, "Keats is preoccupied with the losses, rather than the gains, arising from progress," a view that shrank during the public's overwhelmingly positive response to the Egyptian artifacts' exhibition in the British Museum (Bewell 226). In conversation with Bewell, Phinney points to the implicit challenge in the act of interpreting these ancient artworks in a museum. Using "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Phinney argues that relics like the urn require assessment of both aesthetic and historical qualities. For Phinney, "the ode suggests that neither mode of understanding is sufficient by itself" and underlines the degree to which ancient artworks are either analyzed solely on their appearance or on their existence as a cultural remnant. Like Bewell, Phinney is interested in the larger implications of bringing ancient artworks to a museum. But despite their close attention to the artwork in Keats's poems, neither critic, like Larrabee, mentions ekphrasis. They thus leave us questioning what it means for Keats to render a visual museum encounter in verbal form.

Because of the overwhelming presence of similar scholarship to Bewell and Phinney, Grant Scott's book, *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, and The Visual Arts*, sits in a

relatively unoccupied space on the shelf housing Keats's critics. Among the critics that do mention ekphrasis in the context of Romantic poetry, Scott remains the only one to have devoted a book-length study to it. In his book, Scott explicates many of Keats's distinctly ekphrastic poems—poems that all concern a work of art, such as “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” “The Eve of St. Agnes,” and “Fragment of ‘The Castle Builder’”—in terms of the psychological dynamic established between the speaker and the object of his gaze. Building upon W.J.T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory* (1982), a seminal work dedicated to theories of visual representation, Scott positions Keats's speaker as a “male gazer” standing before a mysterious female “objet d'art” (Scott xiv). These art objects, according to Scott, are attractive to Keats because they are each “a symbolic fragment rescued from the destructive forces of time” and “preserved” in the British Museum (15). The majority of museum-goers had never seen such relics before. For Scott, Keats's ekphrasis of these objects is “a kind of verbal imperialism,” an effort to appropriate and interpret female relics by moving them into the realm of verbal discourse (45). But Keats, says Scott, struggles to actually interpret the artifacts because he cannot decipher their antiquated, often fragmented, form. Keats's act of ekphrasis thereby results in “peculiar anxieties” related to his poetic skill, and he finds himself suddenly doubting his potential to be remembered after death.

Like Scott, I seek to highlight the term “ekphrasis” to help increase its popular association with Keats's verse. But whereas Scott dedicates most of his attention to the psychological and gendered elements of ekphrasis, I will return to its traditional roots. Scott's argument demonstrates that part of what earlier criticism lacks is an attention to the peculiar relationship between gazer and artwork. But what of the artwork itself? Unlike the critics I mentioned before, Scott spends less time considering Keats's artworks ancient, time-worn relics

and more time on their being “symbols” prone to a “male gaze.” Keats’s ekphrasis, however, exhibits both “Romantic” and “Classical” characteristics; he focuses just as much on the speaker’s emotional reaction as he does on the artwork’s physical condition. Because Scott prioritizes the former, what remains absent from the current critical conversation is a convergence between “ekphrasis” and the materiality of the artworks involved in it. While I still intend to highlight Keats’s anxious response to the museum artifacts, I will identify it as a product of witnessing their irreparable and indecipherable condition rather than as the result of a particular gender dynamic. My hope is that this convergence will advance the critical conversation surrounding Keats’s interest in sculpture while simultaneously rekindling the Classical origin of ekphrasis as a rhetorical device dedicated to physical artworks.

I will characterize these artworks’ physical condition as that of a dysfunctional memorial. In his poems, Keats describes the sculptures’ appearance as broken and mysterious not simply for visual effect, but to underline their failure to memorialize a specific element of their ancient past. Keats is also sensitive to the artworks being *silent*, a redundant adjective when applied to sculptures, but one that highlights their failure to communicate an ancient history and meaning. The very etymology of ekphrasis—the ancient Greek word meaning “to speak out” or “to tell in full”—is thus the very act that Keats’s artworks’ cannot accomplish. Rather than highlight the insight gained from encountering works of art, Keats’s ekphrasis highlights only what those artworks cannot offer and what they have lost to time. After seeing that even marble sculptures are subject to time’s dominance, Keats cannot help but think of his own comparatively brief and likely more forgettable mortal life. Ironically, but perhaps fittingly, Keats’s gravestone functions identically to the ancient marble; it, too, is a dysfunctional memorial for being unable to “speak out” and inspire remembrance of its occupant.

To showcase the artworks' condition as failing memorials as well as the anxiety they produce within the speaker, I will frame my analysis of Keats's ekphrastic poetry around three main poems or "art exhibits," if you will, that correspond to the three sections of this paper: "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles," and *The Fall of Hyperion*. Criticism is nothing new to these poems; in fact, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" alone is one of the most frequently analyzed poems in the English language. But rather than attempt to fully explicate Keats's verse, my goal is to conduct a targeted reading that, so far, other critics have ignored. In this paper, I will read the above poems "ekphrastically," which is to say in terms of a speaker encountering a work of art, while paying close attention to each artwork's physical condition. As we move together from exhibit to exhibit, I will try not only to show how each artwork functions as a failed memorial, but also how Keats is able to sympathize with their condition as such. By using ekphrasis as a critical lens—relying especially on its Classical use in focusing on an exact object—my paper ultimately aims to generate not only better understandings of Keats and his ekphrastic poetry, but also a better understanding of what it means to be a forgotten work of art.

Ode on a Grecian Urn

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
 Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
 Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
 What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
 What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

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:
 Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
 Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
 Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
 Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;
 She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
 Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
 And, happy melodist, unwearied,
 For ever piping songs for ever new;
 More happy love! more happy, happy love!
 For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
 For ever panting, and for ever young;
 All breathing human passion far above,
 That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
 To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
 Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
 And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
 What little town by river or sea shore,
 Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
 Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
 And, little town, thy streets for evermore
 Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
 Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
 Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
 With forest branches and the trodden weed;
 Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
 As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
 When old age shall this generation waste,
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
 "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

—John Keats, 1820

Exhibit One: The Grecian Urn

Helen Vendler says it best: “The constitutive trope of the Urn is interrogation, that trope of the perplexed mind” (118). We come to know the urn not by the speaker’s confident, precise descriptions, but by a series of questions aimed at its very being. The questions are not complex; they are straightforward and direct interrogations about the nature of the images on the urn’s surface. In only the first stanza, the speaker asks: “What men or gods are these? What maidens loth? / What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?” (II. 8-10). The speaker does not understand these celebratory figures and events, and his lengthy and diverse list of questions makes him seem desperate to learn their identity. The urn is, after all, a “Grecian Urn,” and thereby presents itself as an intriguing relic born from a culturally rich civilization. However, this “Silvan historian” counterintuitively relates no history and remains in “silent form” for almost the entire duration of the poem (II. 3, 44). Alone and unaided, the speaker cannot decipher the urn’s images and can only ask it more questions. While the elaborate vessel may suggest an ability to tell a particular story, it fails to do so because the meaning and relevance in its displayed narrative has faded along with ancient Greece. Thanks to the passage of time, the urn cannot memorialize its culture of origin.

One useful way of thinking about the urn’s condition as an ancient, forgotten relic is through the words of Martin Heidegger, author of *The Origin of the Work of Art*. Although Heidegger’s essay is of a much larger scope than the subject of ancient relics, he nevertheless attempts to answer the question of what happens when an artwork is removed from its culture of origin, either physically or temporally. For the purposes of my analysis, I assume that the “Grecian Urn” is a relic found in a museum, although the urn is nowhere explicitly associated with one. The speaker’s curious, visitor-like attitude toward the object may, however, be

evidence enough. Writing about one such ancient artwork taken to a museum, Heidegger says:

World-withdrawal and world-decay can never be undone. The works are no longer the same as they once were. It is the themselves, to be sure, that we encounter there, but they themselves are gone by. As bygone works they stand over against us in the realm of tradition and conservation. Henceforth they remain merely such objects. Their standing before us is still indeed a consequence of, but no longer the same as, their former self-subsistence. This self-subsistence has fled from them. (Heidegger 41)

This passage describes an artwork's identity change. For Heidegger, when an artwork leaves a "world," it not only loses its geographic location, but also its relationship to the people and culture within it. The artwork thereby becomes but a shadow of itself, now "gone by," because it can no longer be appreciated and valued by its original creators for its original purpose. It is "no longer the same," and lacks its former "self-subsistence," its ability to be the artwork it was meant to be rather than just a museum exhibition. In the context of Keats's poem, the urn is just such a "bygone" artwork. It has left its "world" of ancient Greece, both physically and temporally, and sits decontextualized before visitors who struggle to decipher its images. The urn can thus never truly represent, much less return, home.

Keats almost explicitly suggests this Heideggerian concept in the poem. After asking yet another question, this time directed to the "mysterious priest" as "To what green altar... / Leadst thou that heifer lowing at the skies," he inquires about a "little town." This town is "emptied" of its folk, who at first glance seem to be the frozen figures on the urn's surface (II. 41-42, 44, 45). The speaker then somberly apostrophizes: "little town, thy streets for evermore, / Will silent be; and not a soul to tell / why thou art desolate, can e'er return" (II. 48-50). Again, we might

perceive this imagined “little town” as belonging to the festivity’s participants who the urn depicts as having fled to a wooded clearing to conduct a ritual. They would never be able to “return” because of their frozen state on the urn’s surface. But the “town” may also be read as the birthplace of the urn itself. The fact that it lies situated “by river or sea shore” could suggest a Grecian isle on the Mediterranean Sea. The urn may be imaginary, but like the other objects in the British Museum from which this ode was undoubtedly inspired, it had a place of origin, a past “world” of its own. A millennia’s worth of time, however, separates the urn from its origin in Greece, and its “little town” has grown “silent” and “desolate” as a result. But just as the urn “can e’er return” to this lost context, neither can the speaker, who continually yearns to know as much as possible about the artwork.

The speaker, however, is aware that he will never know the secrets behind the urn’s images in part because he constantly refers to their static condition. Despite his longing for them to move and thereby reveal the story, they remain fixed to the vessel’s surface. To the “fair youth, beneath the trees,” the speaker says “thou canst not leave,” just as he admits that “nor ever can those trees be bare” because the season is frozen in spring. To the “Bold lover,” he mourns that “never, never canst thou kiss” before reassuring him that “For ever wilt thou love” because of his fixed stance next to his lover (II. 15-17, 20). Even the urn will “remain” while “old age shall this generation waste,” its marble form unchanging while the speaker succumbs to his own mortality (II. 46-47). Perhaps what the speaker suggests, then, when he admits in the beginning that the urn *can* “express / a flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme” is that to construct a narrative from the urn’s static images, one must rely on imagination (II. 3-4). Keats indeed prescribes his own narrative when he assumes that the piper would “play on” and that the lover would “kiss.” But these foresights occur only in his head while the urn before him sits

motionless. All the while he pines for the urn's real story.

Although Keats is redundant in emphasizing the urn's incapability of speech, he nevertheless pays significant attention to its silence. First and foremost, the urn is a "foster-child of silence and slow time" (II. 2). A "foster-child" by definition is one that has been placed into a ward or private home for being in need of a parent or guardian. The British Museum, then, may be a refuge for "homeless" art objects. These artifacts could also be foster-children because they are without "parents," their original Greek creators who lived millennia ago. To be a "foster-child of *silence and slow time*," could then mean one of two things. First, the title could signify being handed over to the domain of "silence" and "slow time," which are perhaps the urn's new "parents." The urn would be subject to "slow time" because it would eventually corrode despite being made of marble, while it would also be subject to silence because it neither responds to the speaker's questions nor speaks outright. But we might also draw our attention to the preposition "of." To be a foster child *of* silence and slow-time could indicate that silence and slow-time are materials *of* which the urn is composed. In other words, the physical condition of the urn, rather than being made simply of earthenware, is in fact composed of a blend of silence and slow-time, two materials or characteristics that assuredly describe the urn. Regardless of any "correct" interpretation, the ambiguity of this distinction underlines the speaker's inability to fully understand the artwork.

But what of the final, infamous, enigmatic lines? After the speaker gravely alludes to his own relatively feeble existence, "when old age shall this generation waste / thou shalt remain..." he concludes with the lines: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (II. 49-50). Although this maxim may be interpreted in a near-infinite number of ways, I wish to propose a reading in line with the speaker's treatment of the urn's

physical condition. Rather than culminate on a word like “history” or “culture,” both of which the speaker has been desperately trying to understand in relation to the urn’s images, the poem ends by highlighting only “beauty.” The phrase soon following it, “all ye need to know,” mocks the speaker’s desire to learn the cultural significance of the urn’s figures by asserting that it is “all ye need to know.” Additionally, Keats may be reacting to the group of literary enthusiasts known as the aesthetes, who, like Keats, published poetry on artwork in the British Museum (McGann 44). However, as the name “aesthetes” suggests, the group tended to praise the physical condition of Classical artifacts instead of remain attentive to the artworks’ loss of an ability to be glossed for meaning. The final two lines, then, may be Keats’s form of protesting against this aesthetic bent and demonstrating how insignificant the artworks’ aesthetic is when compared to their history. Keats, however, must unfortunately remain satisfied with the aesthetic. Because he cannot decipher the urn’s figures, the urn’s basic appearance is all he can really know.

* * *

Whereas “Ode on a Grecian Urn” demonstrates an artwork’s failure to communicate its past to the speaker, Keats’s sonnet, “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” demonstrates the degree to which certain relics have physically deteriorated over time. But rather than interrogate the marbles in an effort to acquire a deeper understanding as he did with the urn, Keats sympathizes with their physical condition as if he is able to see a part of himself in their fragmented form.



Fig. 1. Elgin Marbles East Pediment. Photograph by Andrew Dunn

On Seeing the Elgin Marbles

My spirit is too weak—mortality
 Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
 And each imagined pinnacle and steep
 Of godlike hardship tells me I must die
 Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.
 Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep
 That I have not the cloudy winds to keep
 Fresh for the opening of the morning's eye.
 Such dim-conceived glories of the brain
 Bring round the heart an undescribable feud;
 So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
 That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
 Wasting of old time—with a billowy main—
 A sun—a shadow of a magnitude.

—John Keats (1817)

Exhibit Two: The Elgin Marbles

Unlike the Grecian Urn, which could refer to a number of similar relics in the British Museum, the Elgin Marbles are a known collection of artworks that can be visited today. As I mentioned before, the history surrounding their acquisition carries such intense controversy that questions of ownership are nearly inseparable from any discussion concerning them. While Keats's sonnet is more involved with the marbles in the context of the British Museum rather than with their tumultuous past, I find that an understanding of the marbles' history illuminates several important aspects of the poem. I will thus introduce the sonnet by first relaying an account of Lord Elgin and his involvement with the Athenian Acropolis, the location from which the marbles were taken to England.

Thomas Bruce, the Seventh Earl of Elgin, served as British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire from 1799 to 1803. In the summer of 1800, Parliament tasked him to spread British influence in Greece, then under Ottoman rule, by recording and "preserving" its ancient sculptures (St. Clair 60). After arriving in Athens, Elgin led a team of experienced painters in making parchment copies of the surviving artworks found in ancient sites like the Agora and the Theseion of Athens. With the written consent of Ottoman officials, he also ordered them to erect scaffolding around the Parthenon in order to apply "plaster or gypsum" to ruined figures and thus improve their physical condition (St. Clair 62). The overall task was not an easy one. Apart from the scorching summer temperatures, Elgin's team struggled to find salvageable artwork. Since its first plundering by Constantine the Great, the Athenian Acropolis had been ransacked by the "Franks, Catalans, Navarrese, Florentines, and Venetians before falling to the Ottoman Turks in 1453" (Vrettos 52). In addition to a gunpowder explosion in 1456, a disaster that crumbled much of the previously well-preserved statuary, every invader added to the general defacement of the

Parthenon's relics. Further, the Turks deliberately shattered more sculptures into pieces after realizing that even small shards gathered enormous profit. Even so, nowhere in the original Ottoman administrative order, or "firman," did Elgin possess the right to ship fragments of stone back to England; instead, he and his group were required to stay on site.

That original order, however, did not persist. In 1801, the Ottoman authority presiding over Lord Elgin and his company divided into two groups: the *Voivode*, which controlled the Greek civilian population, and the *Disdar*, which now controlled the Acropolis and the Turkish military (Vrettos 50). Reverend Philip Hunt, a chaplain to Lord Elgin, used this political upheaval as an opportunity to negotiate new terms to the firman. In addition to the Turks' profit-driven destruction of Greek statuary, the threat of Napoleon lay on the horizon. Although no attack was imminent, Napoleon's recent declaration to invade Greece produced waves of anxiety in the British expedition (Vrettos 48). If this "invasion" bore any similarity to his previous Egyptian conquest, Hunt and Elgin knew that any hope at preserving art for Britain would be lost. Using the Turks' political instability to his advantage, Hunt secured a revised firman. It read:

Under the penalty of death, no interruption shall be given His Excellency, Lord Elgin nor to his painters who are engaged in fixing scaffolds around the ancient Temple of the Idols. And in modelling the said ornaments, or in measuring the ruins of fallen temples, no obstacle shall be thrown in their way by the Voivode, or any other office of the Turkish army. No one shall meddle with the scaffolding or implements, *and if the said painters wish to take away any pieces of stone with old inscriptions, or sculptures therein, no opposition shall be made.* (Smith 204, emphasis added)

This statement's overwhelming vestment of authority hardly needs elaboration. Elgin's secured artworks, however, did not reach Britain until many years later thanks to the crash of his main cargo ship and an ensuing underwater salvaging expedition (Vrettos 74). Because of the wreckage the marbles' endured both on that voyage and during their time spent under Ottoman rule, many may consider their transportation to the British Museum an act of preservation and benevolence. Their continued exhibition in the British Museum, however, maintains a high degree of controversy. Rather than take a stance in the debate surrounding the marbles' acquisition, I wish to recall the thoughts of Heidegger. Whether or not the marbles should be kept in the British Museum does not matter as much as the fact that they now reside in it after being taken from their geographical origin and withstanding physical onslaught. When Keats confronts them, they are appropriately, "shadows of a magnitude" long since past (II. 14).

In the early days of March, 1817, John Keats recorded his first encounter with the Elgin Marbles. In the resulting sonnet, "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles," Keats constructs the poetic equivalent of the deteriorated sculpture before him. Like the marbles, the sonnet's form is structurally weak: Keats's lines are hewn with rough enjambments and unsettled by irregular meter. Even the speaker is susceptible to ruin. As the sonnet progresses, his language becomes less concrete and finally crumbles in a sequence of abstract, grammatically fragmented images. By subjecting both speaker and form to fragmentation, Keats's sonnet resembles the Elgin Marbles' physical condition. The sonnet therefore becomes more than a mere encounter with the artwork; here, we see Keats attempting to sympathize with the marbles' broken state.

The act of first "seeing" the marbles turns the poet himself to stone. Instead of praising the ancient statues as the aesthetes did, he anxiously reflects on his comparatively brief human existence. "Mortality / weighs" so "heavily" on him that he likens himself to "a sick eagle

looking at the sky,” a creature restricted from its ability to fly (II. 1-2, 5). He admits that not even “cloudy winds” will help him see the next sunrise, the “opening of the morning’s eye,” and emphasizes his being moored to the ground and restricted in movement (II. 7-8). Later, he experiences “a most dizzy pain,” a reaction to both his own mortal limitations and to the sculptures’ decay (II. 11). Despite all its classical glory, “Grecian grandeur” is not immune to the “rude / Wasting of old time” (II. 12-13). The poet’s sensitivity to time eventually becomes his undoing. While gazing upon the marbles and absorbing their fragmented state, he stands just as paralyzed as the stone figures before him (II. 3).

After the onset of his “dizzy pain,” the poet’s language lapses into fragments. He resorts to communicating in abstract images separated by em-dashes: “So do these wonders a most dizzy pain, / That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude / Wasting of old time—with a billowy main— / A sun—a shadow of a magnitude” (11-14). The final three images are tangential bursts of thought and fail to form a fitting conclusion to the previous sentence. They are only “dim-conceived” and demonstrate the poet’s deteriorated speech. At this point, the speaker, like the marbles, is but a “shadow of a magnitude,” a faint expression of his former potency. The em dashes cut these images from the rest of the sentence, turning them into fragments, and offer a visible indication of the poet’s decomposition. By the end, the speaker is just as fragmented as the Elgin Marbles.

The sonnet’s broken form demonstrates Keats’s attention to ruin and decay. He disrupts any possible rhythmic regularity by cutting lines with abrupt enjambments, an action that Grant Scott has already pointed out in *The Sculpted Word*. The first line of the poem reads: “My spirit is too weak—mortality / Weighs heavily on me...,” a line that forces the reader to continue reading to the next line in the same breath (II. 1-2). Similar truncations litter the rest of the

sonnet. The line “And each imagined pinnacle and steep” fulfills the function of its final word, “steep,” and tumbles into “of godlike hardship tells me...” (II. 3-4). Keats’s enjambments, or physical truncations of lines, suggest a roughened form not unlike the broken statues. Consider also the final lines: “That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude / Wasting of old time...” If the first line were end-stopped, we would likely read “rude” as a noun, but the break forces us to “adjust” our reading, as Scott says, and label it an adjective (86). Keats’s meter is equally disruptive. Words like “heavily,” “billowy,” “luxury,” “pinnacle,” and “opening” are dactyls: each contains one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables. These dactyls prevent the poem from adhering to iambic pentameter because they are lopsided, uneven metrical units. They bear a rhythmic form not unlike the maimed figures.

“On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” Keats’s first poem on a work of art, was one of many literary responses to the British Museum’s acquired classical artwork in the early 19th-century.³ In comparison to other poems and prose works, the sonnet was an anomaly. Keats’s verse does not praise what many English considered to be the epitome of beauty and human achievement; instead it focuses on sculptural ruin. The sonnet thereby clashes with the patriotic strain induced by the artwork’s presence; while other museum-goers celebrated Britain’s ownership of classical antiquity, Keats felt a “dizzy pain” (Scott 57). This poem’s perspective by no means exemplifies Keats’s further poetic treatment of sculpture, but it does signal a future interest in what his fellow writers remained blind to: the loss of an ancient culture via the deterioration and temporal displacement of its artwork.

Our primary source for the intellectual discourse surrounding the British Museum’s

³ While it was his first poem on a sculpture or painting, “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” was arguably not Keats’s first *ekphrastic* poem. See “On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer.”

classical art is the *Gentleman's Magazine*, a periodical targeted to the educated elite of early 19th-century Britain. In January of 1817, the magazine published a notice introducing the public to the Elgin Marbles exhibition in the British Museum. A section of the notice reads as follows:

The publick will very shortly be gratified by free access to those famous Athenian Sculptures which were lately purchased for the Nation by the British ambassador to the porte... We are struck with them as the remains of ages so renowned, and so long passed away! We are interested with them as performances of matchless beauty, and many of them the work of Ictinus, under the superintendence of Phidias... They are, however, a proud trophy, because their display in the British metropolis is the result of public taste; and also a pleasing one, because they are not the price of blood, shed in wanton or ambitious wars. United to the Townley and other collections, the suite of rooms exhibits the finest display of the art of sculpture to be found in the world, and they will always do honour to the metropolis, and to the parties concerned in assembling and purchasing them. (Jan. 1817: 80)

This description oozes cultural appropriation. Despite acknowledging their origin and creators, the notice wraps the statues in British patriotic fervor. Instead of exhibited as an homage to the ancient history, the marbles were “purchased for the Nation” and are “proud trophies” that “do honor to the metropolis.” For Eric Gidal, the art objects “conversion into trophies” signifies “nothing more than the pride and pleasure of their acquisition” (116). Even the acknowledgment of the artworks’ past carries a celebratory tone; the notice highlights the “remains of ages so renowned” as if impressed by the sculptures’ ability to endure rather than degrade over time. The magazine revels in the appearance of these “remains” to justify the British government’s

acquisition. It describes the marbles as “performances of matchless beauty” that stand as the “finest display of the art of sculpture to be found in the world.” While this aesthetic celebration honors “Ictinus” and “Phidias,” the original sculptors, it decontextualizes the Elgin Marbles by framing them as a key to British cultural prosperity and empowerment.

In response to this initial wave of glorification, several poets submitted ekphrastic poetry to the *Gentleman’s Magazine* and to the *Annals of the Fine Arts*, a separate periodical dedicated to praising the “perfect and complete idea of The Beautiful” in Greek art (McGann 44). To demonstrate Keats’s comparatively somber treatment of sculpture, I will briefly analyze an exemplary work written by an aesthetic celebrant. Unlike Keats, the aesthetes fed off of the enthusiasm surrounding the marbles exhibition. Consider “The Elgin Marbles,” a poem submitted anonymously to the *Gentleman’s Magazine* almost a year after Keats wrote his sonnet:

Are these the fragments of the glorious prime
 Of that great Empire, mistress of the world,
 Who, Queen of Nations, high in air unfurl’d
 Her standard, and outstretch’d her arm sublime? —
 Yes! and they mock all-devouring Time;
 For oft, in anger, at yon fane he hurl’d
 His iron rod, but prostrate at the shrine
 Of the Great Goddess harmlessly it fell,
 Till he, struck motionless, as with a spell,
 Gazed wildly, and proclaim’d the power divine.
 Phidias! thou hast immortalized thy name
 In these thy handy-works, and they will tell

Loud as ten thousand thunderings thy fame

Wherever truth and beauty deign to dwell. (January 1818: 65)

This sonnet's speaker stands before the art objects just as Keats's does in "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles." However, he or she contradicts Keats's mournful descriptions by highlighting the sculptures' superiority to time. Strangely, the poem begins with oxymoronic "fragments," which denote wear on statues that supposedly "mock all-devouring Time." When Time hurls an "iron rod" in anger, the rod falls "harmlessly," leaving no mark on the sculptures' surface. Afterwards, Time stands still, "struck motionless, as with a spell," upon realizing that the statues are indestructible. This moment directly opposes Keats's speaker's paralysis. In Keats's poem, the speaker stands still in fear of Time's "rude wasting," but here Time itself remains motionless in defeat. The poem ends in praise of the sculpture's enduring aesthetic. The statues "tell / Loud as ten thousand thunderings" the fame of their maker, Phidias, "Wherever truth and beauty deign to dwell." In the speaker's eyes, the statues will forever remain beautiful and untouched by Time.⁴

The significance in Keats's sensitivity to time's passing is his understanding that Britain possessed deteriorated relics of a lost culture. The aesthetes, in contrast, praised the sculptures as if they were newly wrought artworks designed for the British public. The anonymously authored "Elgin Marbles" depicts the marbles' transportation as an initiation into a superior realm. For the speaker, the "fragments" hail from the "glorious prime / Of that great Empire, mistress of the world, / Who, Queen of Nations, high in air unfurl'd / Her standard, and outstretch'd her arm sublime" (II. 1-4). This embellished rhetoric shrouds the sculptures' origination in ancient Greece and celebrates the marbles' British ownership. The poet even depicts the acquisition as a

⁴ While I acknowledge that this poem relies on similar enjambments to Keats's own sonnet, I maintain that they are far less significant. Whereas a "fractured" poetic form fits the content of Keats's sonnet, a similar form does not match the celebratory content of this verse.

process of divine selection, as if the “Queen of Nations” stretched out her “arm sublime” and delivered the marbles to Britain. We may thus more easily observe just how unique Keats’s treatment of sculptures was in the context of his time period. He possessed a sympathy and awareness of their condition that no other contemporary seemed to have.

From *The Fall of Hyperion* —

Long, long those two were postured motionless,
Like sculpture builded up upon the grave
Of their own power. A long awful time
I look'd upon them: still they were the same;
The frozen God still bending to the earth,
And the sad Goddess weeping at his feet,
Moneta silent. Without stay or prop
But my own weak mortality, I bore
The load of this eternal quietude,
The unchanging gloom, and the three fixed shapes
Ponderous upon my senses, a whole moon. (II. 421-431)

Exhibit Three: The Fallen Titans

In the spring of 1819, Keats momentarily cracked under the pressure to follow in the wake of Dante, Spenser, and Milton by abandoning *Hyperion*, his first attempt at an epic poem. During the previous year, Keats had thoroughly annotated *Paradise Lost* and consumed Henry Francis Cary's translation of *Divine Comedy* during a walking tour of Scotland (Newey 70). Keats sought to prepare himself to be the Homeric tradition's next torch-bearer; to his close friend Benjamin Haydon, he wrote that his work would follow a "grecian Manner" and boasted that his "march of passion and endeavor will be undeviating" (*Letters*, 207). But after almost finishing three "books" of *Hyperion*, Keats complained that his verse was too similar to Milton's for containing an abundance of inversions. Despite his already colossal effort, he abruptly abandoned the project and forever left his poem in the state of its subtitle: *Hyperion: A Fragment*.

Two months later, Keats revised his epic. The central storyline was still the Titanomachia, the history of the Titans' fall and the rise of their offspring, the Olympian gods. But perhaps to better showcase his poetic originality and set himself apart from his literary predecessors, Keats situated *himself* as a character in the poem. The new work became *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, and the events of the Titanomachia are only recounted after the speaker falls into a deep sleep and envisions himself among the Titans. The speaker therefore becomes more than a storyteller; by weaving himself into the poem's fabric, Keats dedicates *The Fall of Hyperion* to the inner workings of his own mind as much as, if not more than, a retelling of a mythological history.

Both original and revised versions of the epic paved the way for historical and

psychoanalytic approaches to Keats's work.⁵ One critic, Martin Aske, suggests that *Hyperion's* unfinished, fragmented state may be read as a radical commentary on the ability for epics to preserve history. For Aske, "*Hyperion* proceeds to deconstruct not only those monumental epic narratives which had served as models for the poem, but also the poet's own desire for a form which would be blissfully undeviating in its representation of the ancient fictions" (Aske 86). Aske reads *Hyperion* as a departure from previous epics. Rather than stand as a monument to a religious or mythological past as does *Paradise Lost*, *Hyperion* is an "epitaph to its own fragmentation," a broken narrative centered on the impossibility for even deities to withstand time (Aske 94). Another critic, Joel Faflak, focuses on the Titans' fragmented state in *The Fall* through a psychoanalytic lens. For Faflak, both Keats and the Titans experience "the trauma of lost divinity" (312). Just as the Titans crumble in proportion to their loss of divine influence, so too does Keats as he worries if his own poetic influence will endure. His anxiety only grows when he confronts the Titans' marble husks in his dream. Faflak thus reads sculptural fragmentation as a metaphor for psychological destabilization and identifies *The Fall* as a product of Keats's frightened mind.

Rather than move outward from Keats's "fragments" to the larger themes of history or trauma, I seek to hone in on the "fragments" themselves, or the exact sculptural artifacts found within the poem. While *The Fall of Hyperion* demands both historical and psychoanalytic readings, I believe it to also demand analysis of the ancient artworks' physical condition. In *The Fall*, as in "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Keats uses ekphrasis to explore and react to specific artworks. But unlike the previous poems, *The Fall* positions Keats

⁵ Both epics have given way to *all kinds* of criticism, however I have found that analyses of the poems' relationship to history and (more recently) of psychoanalytic elements are two of the more popular strains.

at an unusually intimate proximity with those artworks. Rather than observing the Elgin Marbles in the context of the British Museum, Keats writes himself into the ekphrasis to the extent that he becomes a work of art himself. Throughout the poem, Keats sympathizes with the loss of classical art's original context as well as physically reflects sculptural features. But most importantly, he personally exhibits what it means to be a forgotten work of art.

Keats begins the epic in distinctly un-epic fashion by failing to invoke a muse. He instead accomplishes the opposite. Rather than summoning divine inspiration to aid his poetic endeavor, as did Homer, Virgil, Milton, and others before him, Keats despairs over his perceived poetic disintegration. This depression may have been influenced by the recent death of his younger brother, Thomas, to tuberculosis, the disease that had previously claimed Keats's mother and the one he believed he was fated to receive (Gittings 261). Cause aside, the epic's introduction lacks conviction and exudes a mournful tone: "Whether the dream now purpos'd to rehearse / Be poet's or fanatic's will be known / When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave" (II. 16-18). The speaker doubts his own poetic ability; the "dream" he is about to "rehearse" is, to him, no more distinguishable from that of a "fanatic's." He also expresses anxiety over how history will remember him once he lies "in the grave," an anxiety he will not be able to escape for the duration of the epic. Although the richness of his language remains characteristically Keatsian, this moping opening foreshadows his continued "fall" over the course of the epic.

To understand the extent to which Keats "falls" into frozen, sculptural form, we must first understand his extremely un-sculpture-like sensitivity to the natural world. Although the speaker has not yet fallen asleep, we are introduced to him within a dream-like environment:

Methought I stood where trees of every clime,
Palm, myrtle, oak, and sycamore, and beech,

With plantain, and spice blossoms, made a screen;
 In neighbourhood of fountains, by the noise
 Soft showering in my ears, and, by the touch
 Of scent, not far from roses. (II. 19-25)

In only six lines, Keats invokes nearly all five of the human senses. First, he sees an assortment of trees and flowers forming a “screen” about him before he hears fountains “showering” his ears. He then describes “the touch / Of scent, not far from roses” lifting to his nose. Although Keats crafts a specific scent, the phrase “touch / Of scent” conjures the feeling of one’s nose physically reacting to an aroma. This collective sensory explosion has multiple effects. Apart from painting precise details for the audience to imagine, it characterizes the speaker as one proud of his ability to interact with the outside world. Every detail is also exact; trees are not simply “trees” but rather palms, myrtles, oaks, sycamores, and beeches. By building up the speaker’s sensitivity and experience with the natural world, Keats demonstrates the extent to which he will lose his organic perception when he grows as cold and senseless as stone.

After drinking from a “cool vessel of transparent juice,” Keats sags to the ground “like a Silenus on an antique vase” (II. 42, 56).⁶ He opens his eyes to find a Greek temple filled with “strange vessels,” “large draperies,” “robes,” and “holy jewelries” (II. 73-80). Although Keats describes this temple as “an old sanctuary with roof august,” it stands as the equivalent to a museum filled with mysterious treasures (II. 62). Notice that a degree of specificity escapes Keats’s language. Whereas before he named every type of tree and flower, he now cannot identify the temple’s contents beyond “strange vessels” or “holy jewelries.” Here, then, is our

⁶ Silenus is a minor rustic god of winemaking and drunkenness who is frequently depicted in a state of alcohol-induced revelry. Here, Keats imagines himself tumbling to the ground in sudden, drunken slumber as Silenus might do himself (*OED*).

first indication of the artistic condition Keats explored previously in “Ode on a Grecian Urn:” the longer artworks survive their creator, the more mysterious and unrecognizable they tend to become. After all, Keats admits that “So old the place was, *I remember’d none* / The like upon the earth,” as though the museum had faded from memory (II. 65-66, emphasis added).

To underline this point, Keats describes the temple’s “silent massy range / Of columns north and south, ending in mist / Of nothing, then to eastward, where black gates / Were shut against the sunrise evermore” (II. 83-86). Given the historical context of Keats’s interest in classical artwork, these “black gates” suggest a political reading. Each of the art objects Keats encounters in his poetry, including the Elgin Marbles, the Grecian Urn, and, as we will soon see, the sculptures of the fallen Titans, are classical and thus “eastward” in origin. The “black gates” could then symbolize two types of sculptural displacement. First, they may represent the inability to ever return to ancient Greece, a long-lost culture forever “shut against the sunrise.” Of course, should the gates explicitly reference “the orient,” then their potential to block off ancient Greece is lost. I instead rely on the more general use of “eastward” to simply indicate that the British Museum’s relics came from an “eastward” direction. But the gates might also indicate a physical displacement. Housed in the British Museum after being “acquired” by the British government, many classical sculptures lay in the far west, the only cardinal direction Keats’s temple leaves unobscured. Further, he describes the temple’s contents as “confused” and lying “all in a mingled heap,” the consequences, possibly, of being literally *dis-oriented*, or removed from their eastern home (II. 78).

Inside the temple, Keats encounters his first deity, albeit one momentarily unknown. While continuing to explore, he notices an altar “to be approach’d on either side by steps” made of marble (II. 90). Before he attempts to climb, he suddenly hears a “Language pronounc’d” that

threatens his approach:

Thy flesh, near cousin to the common dust,
 Will parch for lack of nutriment, thy bones
 Will wither in few years, and vanish so
 That not the quickest eye could find a grain
 Of what thou now art on that pavement cold.
 The sands of thy short life are spent this hour,
 And no hand in the universe can turn
 Thy hourglass, if these gummed leaves be burnt
 Ere thou canst mount up these immortal steps. (II. 109-117)

Keats suddenly finds himself face to face with a trial: if he fails to “mount up these immortal steps,” he will die. The mysterious speaker worsens the threat by appealing to the fear Keats voiced at the epic’s onset. Like all humans, Keats knows that he will die, but he remains afraid of not being remembered after death. The speaker warns that failure to ascend the stairs will cause him to “wither in few years, and vanish so / That not the quickest eye could find a grain / of what thou now art on that pavement cold.” Not a single piece of his decayed being will be left recognizable. Further, the juxtaposition of the phrase “sands of thy short life” and “thy hourglass” suggest that Keats will be eternally punished by disintegrating into the physical manifestation of time itself. However, the speaker’s repeated critique of Keats’s mortality suggests that he might gain immortality upon ascension. For the speaker, human “flesh” is but a “cousin to the common dust,” easily parched and durable enough for only a “short life.” But by saying that “no hand in the universe can turn / Thy hourglass, if these gummed leaves be burnt / Ere thou canst mount up these immortal steps,” the speaker implies that someone *can* turn or

pause the hourglass. The stairs are “immortal,” after all, and therefore timeless. Overwhelmed by the unknown voice’s guarantee of impending death, Keats moves to take his first step upward.

Just as Keats begins the climb, he feels mortality desert him, but not in any beneficial way. Although his composition does not turn to stone, he undergoes a bout of extreme paralysis that renders his physical state similar to sculpture:

...when suddenly a palsied chill
 Struck from the paved level up my limbs,
 And was ascending quick to put cold grasp
 Upon those streams that pulse beside the throat...
 Slow, heavy, deadly was my pace: the cold
 Grew stiffening, suffocating, at the heart;
 And when I clasp’d my hands I felt them not. (II. 122-125, 129-131)

Notice first the rapid change in temperature. The cold within the steps’ marble veins quickly runs up “from the paved level” to his body, chilling his naturally warm blood. His “pace” made “slow,” “heavy,” and “deadly,” could refer to the speed of his ascent or to his heartbeat; both, however, suggest a gradual slowing of time. The cold also robs him of his usually heightened senses. No longer the poet capable of detecting the subtleties of the natural world, Keats admits that he can no longer feel his hands. His overall experience resembles that of a cryogenic chamber, his frozen, suspended body less susceptible to the progression of time. This freeze recalls the “Cold Pastoral” of the Grecian Urn and its sturdy but lifeless form able to withstand millennia. For the first time, Keats can sympathize with the physical condition of sculpture. But just as soon as the cool paralysis began, Keats finds himself stepping up from the final step where he is greeted by “life,” which “seem’d to pour in at the toes” (II. 134).

At the top of the steps he meets Moneta, the “High Prophetess” of the temple and the owner of the threatening voice. Keats begs her to tell him where he is, how he was able to climb the stairs, and “for whom this incense curls” by the alter (II. 211). Moneta first responds that “None can usurp this height” except for “those to whom the miseries of the world / Are misery, and will not let them rest” (II. 147-148). While the exact meaning of this utterance is ambiguous, we might suppose that Keats’s depressed state at the poem’s beginning helped him arrive at the temple and satisfied the “misery” requirement. In answer to Keats’s next questions, Moneta guides him around the alter to stand before a dilapidated statue whose face he “cannot see” (II. 212). Moneta proceeds to reveal the temple’s secret and the identity of the sculpture: “This temple, sad and lone, / Is all spar’d from the thunder of a war / Foughten long since by giant hierarchy / Against rebellion: this old image here, / Whose carved features wrinkled as he fell / Is Saturn’s...” (II. 220-225). Keats finally confronts the disintegrated Saturn, the Titan lord who, as Moneta explains, fell to the Olympians. Ironically, not even Saturn, the lord of time, could escape the physical wear of his domain, his own face an unrecognizable heap of stone. Moneta’s temple, “sad and lone,” is therefore no museum or place of worship; rather, it is a paradox, a mausoleum dedicated to the memory of a Titanic generation almost totally forgotten and defaced.

After revealing the identity of the crumbled deity, Moneta conjures for Keats a vision of the final moments of the Titans’ lives. Moneta whisks Keats back in time to stand silent and unseen before Saturn and his wife, Rhea. Both lie still beneath a moonlit sky, their bodies statuesque before Keats’s eyes:

Long, long those two were postured motionless,
Like sculpture builded up upon the grave

Of their own power. A long awful time
 I look'd upon them: still they were the same;
 The frozen God still bending to the earth,
 And the sad Goddess weeping at his feet,
 Moneta silent. Without stay or prop
 But my own weak mortality, I bore
 The load of this eternal quietude,
 The unchanging gloom, and the three fixed shapes
 Ponderous upon my senses, a whole moon. (II. 421-431).

Here, Keats's depicts Saturn and his wife, Rhea, in their fallen state. At this point, they have lost to the Olympians. Keats perceives them as two beings "postured motionless," standing upon the "grave of their own power." A "long awful time" Keats watches them, but the Titan king and queen "remain the same," forever trapped in stone. What is unusual about this passage, and perhaps about *The Fall of Hyperion* in general, is that Keats devotes minimal attention to the *victors*, the popular, youthful Olympian gods that now dominate the earth and heavens. Instead, Keats chooses to focus his attention on the losers, the "frozen" Titans bereft of their former might. This decision alone, even without the many descriptions of the Titans' inferior state, counteracts the celebratory tone of previous epics. Keats is absorbed with the degree of loss the Titans' experience. He even suggests an effort to sympathize with them. Without any support but "his own weak mortality," he bears "the load of this eternal quietude, / The unchanging gloom, and the three fixed shapes / Ponderous upon my senses, a whole moon." One reading could be that Keats records the act of fully processing the scene, which includes silent sculpture, a gloom, and a whole moon. But to have "bore the load of this eternal quietude" could also imply that

Keats attempts to *remove* the stone from the mute sculptures, the “eternal quietude,” and carry the weight himself. Once again, albeit unthreatened by Moneta while climbing the “immortal stairs,” Keats attempts to experience a sculptural condition, further cementing his sympathy with ancient, forgotten artworks.

Conclusion: The “Poet-Painter”

Understanding the similarities among Keats’s ekphrastic poems makes the epitaph on the poet’s gravestone all the more tragic. Rather than be solely representative of Keats’s hopelessness near death, the epitaph additionally recalls the physical condition of the Classical sculptures Keats poeticized. Keats had not long to live after finishing *The Fall of Hyperion*, and his insertion of his identity into the work as well as his transformation into a sculpture may have been a kind of foreshadowing to his final resting place.

I invite you now to consider one final ekphrastic poem that came several decades after Keats’s death. Its subject, of course, is Keats’s gravestone, and it attempts to undo everything grim about Keats’s preferred means of memorialization. The poem, “On the Grave of Keats,” was written by Oscar Wilde, an author deeply affected by the “Young English Poet’s” legacy. The poem reads as follows:

Rid of the world’s injustice, and his pain,
 He rests at last beneath God’s veil of blue:
 Taken from life when life and love were new
 The youngest of the martyrs here is lain,
 Fair as Sebastian, and as early slain.
 No cypress shades his grave, no funeral yew,
 But gentle violets weeping with the dew
 Weave on his bones an ever-blossoming chain.
 O proudest heart that broke for misery!
 O sweetest lips since those of Mitylene!
 O poet-painter of our English Land!

Thy name is writ in water—it shall stand:
 And tears like mine will keep thy memory green,
 As Isabella did her Basil-tree.

Although I will not fully explicate it, I wish to direct the reader to several key features of this poem. Maybe more than anything, Wilde demonstrates that the act of ekphrasis can be entirely subjective: poets can “draw” whatever they wish to in reaction to a work of art. While Keats may have an affinity for detecting the loss within ancient artworks, Wilde may have an affinity for detecting life. For example, we might juxtapose this sonnet, which is a traditional sonnet in its evocation of love and admiration, with the anxious, fragmented sonnet form of Keats’s “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles.” For the hopeful Wilde, Keats’s name is far from evaporated. It is able to “stand,” albeit perhaps only by the supply of tears Wilde offers to keep Keats’s “memory green.” By titling and situating the poem on the occasion of “The Grave of Keats,” Wilde successfully undoes the morose epitaph and restores the memorial capabilities of Keats’s grave.

Interestingly, and in keeping with this sonnet’s ekphrastic rhetorical mode, Wilde labels Keats a “poet-painter” as if he cannot decide which occupation better describes him. The full line itself, “O poet-painter of our English land,” suggests Keats’s extraordinary ability to describe the natural world. However, the label might also describe Keats’s rapt attention to poeticizing works of art despite the fact that Keats preferred the sculptural medium. But most significantly, the term bridges two artistic mediums (its hyphen acting as an actual bridge) in order to demonstrate how they each share significant similarities. Thinking about ekphrasis, by extension, forces us to ponder questions of medium and what it means for visual artworks to be represented in words.

Although they did not write about the same object, the differences between Wilde’s and Keats’s ekphrastic poems may be easily compared to a group painting session during which

multiple people attempt to recreate the same image on canvas. Undoubtedly, each member will paint a slightly different image with slight variations in color, shape, and size. Wilde and Keats demonstrate that no two writers will have the exact same perspective on an art object and that their resulting words will always be different. Taking this individuality into account, we might thus consider a writer's act of ekphrasis to be an extension of themselves. From Keats, we not only learn about the failed memorial condition of Classical artworks in the British Museum, but also of the failed memorial condition Keats perceives in *himself*. "Ekphrasis," from the Greek *ekphrazein* for "to speak out," may just as well apply to the speaker as it might to a described art object. The barriers between mediums as well as the barriers between speaker and object break down. Keats therefore shows us that artistic expression passes just as fluidly between mediums as it does between a viewer and a work of art.

Word Count: 11,034

Works Cited

- Aske, Martin. *Keats and Hellenism: An Essay*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985. Print.
- Becker, Andrew S. *The Shield of Achilles and the Poetics of Ekphrasis*. London: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1995. Print.
- Bewell, Alan J. "The Political Implication of Keats's Classicist Aesthetics." *Studies in Romanticism* 25.2 (Summer 1986): 220-229. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 Feb. 2016.
- Dunn, Andrew. *Elgin Marbles East Pediment*. 3 December 2005.
- Faflak, Joel. "Romantic Psychoanalysis: Keats, Identity, and (The Fall of) Hyperion." *Lessons of Romanticism: A Critical Companion*. Ed. Thomas Pfau and Robert F. Gleckner. Durham: Duke UP, 1998. Print. 304-322.
- Gidal, Eric. *Poetic Exhibitions: Romantic Aesthetics and the Pleasures of the British Museum*. London: Bucknell UP, 2001. Print.
- Gittings, Robert. *John Keats*. Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1968. Print.
- Hagstrum, Jean H. *The Sister Arts*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1958. Print.
- Heffernan, James. *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1993. Print.
- Heidegger, Martin. *The Origin of the Work of Art*. Trans. Kenneth Haynes and Julian Young. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. Print.
- Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin, 1990.
- Keats, John. *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982. Print.
- . "Ode on a Grecian Urn." (282).
- . "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles." (58).
- . "The Fall of Hyperion." (435-448).

Larrabee, Stephen A. *English Bards and Grecian Marbles*. New York: Columbia UP, 1943.

Print.

McGann, Jerome. *The Romantic Ideology*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1983. Print.

Mitchell, W.J.T. *Picture Theory*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1995. Print.

Newey, Vincent. "Hyperion, *The Fall of Hyperion*, and Keats's Epic Ambitions." *The Cambridge Companion to John Keats*. Ed. Susan J. Wolfson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 69-85.

Phinney, A.W. "Keats in the Museum: Between Aesthetics and History." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*. 90.2 (1991): 208-229. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 Feb. 2016.

Scott, Grant. *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, and the Visual Arts*. Hanover: UP of New England, 1994. Print.

"Silenus, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2016. Web. 24 March 2016.

St. Clair, William. *Lord Elgin and the Marbles*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983. Print.

The Gentleman's Magazine. *Hathi Trust Digital Library*. 26 Feb. 2016. Web.

---. "(London, Jan, 1817): 80."

---. "(London, Jan, 1818): 65."

The Letters of John Keats, Vol. 1 & 2. Ed. Hyder E. Rollins. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958.

Print.

---. "Keats to Charles." January 1818.

---. "Keats to Fanny." January 1818.

---. "Keats to Haydon." January 1818.

Vendler, Helen. *The Odes of John Keats*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983. Print.

Vrettos, Theodore. *The Elgin Affair: The Abduction of Antiquity's Greatest Treasures and the Passions it Aroused*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 1997. Print.

Wordsworth, William. *The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth*. Wordsworth Poetry Library. London: Bibliophile Books, 1993. Print.

---. "Upon the Sight of a Beautiful Picture." (299).

Works Consulted

- Abrams, M.H. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. New York: Oxford UP, 1953. Print.
- Bate, Walter Jackson. *John Keats*. Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard UP, 1963. Print.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Visionary Company*. Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1961. Print.
- Cook, B. F. *The Elgin Marbles*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984. Print.
- D'Arcy Wood, Gillen. *Romanticism and Music Culture in Britain, 1770-1840*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010. Print.
- Evert, Walter H. *Aesthetic and Myth in the Poetry of Keats*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1965. Print.
- Francis, Frank Chalton. *Treasures of the British Museum*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1971. Print.
- Gaull, Marilyn. *English Romanticism: The Human Context*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1988. Print.
- Gidal, Eric. *Poetic Exhibitions: Romantic Aesthetics and the Pleasures of the British Museum*. London: Bucknell UP, 2001. Print.
- Hirst, Wolf Z. "How Dreams Become Poems: Keats's Imagined Sculpture and Re-Vision of Epic." *The Romantic Imagination: Literature and Art in England and Germany*. Ed. Frederick Burwick and Jürgen Klein. Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996. 301-314. Print.
- Holcomb, Grant. *Voices in the Gallery: Writers on Art*. Rochester, NY: U of Rochester, 2001. Print.
- Kelley, Theresa M. "Keats and 'ekphrasis'." *The Cambridge Companion to John Keats*. Ed. Susan J. Wolfson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.

- Krieger, Murray and Joan Krieger. *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992. Print.
- Langan, Celeste and Maureen N. McLane. "The Medium of Romantic Poetry." *The Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry*. Ed. James Chandler and Maureen N. McLane. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008. Print.
- Lee, Rensselaer W. *Ut Pictura Poesis; the Humanistic Theory of Painting*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1967. Print.
- Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Trans. Ellen Frothingham. Mineola: Dover Publications, 2005. Print.
- Michener, James A. *A Century of Sonnets*. Austin: State House, 1997. Print.
- Newey, Vincent. "Hyperion, *The Fall of Hyperion*, and Keats's Epic Ambitions." *The Cambridge Companion to John Keats*. Ed. Susan J. Wolfson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 69-85.
- Nichols, Ashton. *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Toward Urbanatural Roosting*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.
- Roe, Nicholas. *Keats and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. Print.
- Sigler, David. *Sexual Enjoyment in British Romanticism: Gender and Psychoanalysis, 1753-1835*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2015. Print.
- Thomas, Sophie. *Romanticism and Visuality: Fragments, History, Spectacle*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- Wale, John. "Sacred Objects and the Sublime Ruins of Art." *Beyond Romanticism*. Ed. Stephen Copley and John Wale. London: Routledge, 1992. Print.