

## Truth Beauty

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‘...truth beauty...’—this is the second half. The first is: ‘Beauty is truth.’ So again, or still—Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’—and the rest: ‘that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.’<sup>1</sup> Thus a poem about truth and beauty, and beauty and truth, knowledge and need, mortality and friendship, the Greeks and us, urns and poetry—among other things.

Or is it? For could it be that we have missed something? Maybe even something staring us straight in the face? And for two hundred years or more? So, what have we been missing?

Beauty is truth, but truth is not beauty. Keats does not write: truth is beauty. Obviously he could have, but he need not—because being is implied: ‘truth beauty’ means ‘truth is beauty’. Or does it? And if he did not use the little word ‘is’ in the second sentence, why not?

Because if Keats wrote ‘truth is beauty’, being would not be implied. It would be present, there in front of us, in the text, stuck between truth and beauty. This is what we have missed: the ‘is’, that which is to be, i.e., being. We have been missing *that* being is not present, not there, the fact that ‘is’ is only implied, or only an implication; as well as *how* so, how being could be something that would not come to presence and present itself—or more precisely, if the ‘*how*’ is determinative for the ‘*that*’, then *how* being is implied is what allows it to be *that* which it is, an implication.

Here then, again, is the poem, Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’:

1.

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?

2.

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;

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<sup>1</sup> John Keats Collection (1814-1891), Houghton Library, Harvard University; common place book of R. Woodhouse: transcripts of unpublished poems (MS Keats 3.2). On textual history, see J.D. Wigod, ‘Keats’s Ideal in the Ode on a Grecian Urn’, *PMLA*, 72 (March 1957), p. 118; and J. Stillinger, ‘Keats’s Grecian Urn and the Evidence of Transcripts’, *PMLA*, 73 (September 1958), pp. 447-448.

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!

3.

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.

4.

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.

5.

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.

So this is what Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is on about: being. It is about the little word 'is' that is not there nor not-there, neither present nor absent. Indeed, the entire poem builds up to this line: 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'. We must wait for it. But when it comes, it is not there—where being is supposed to be, it is not. But nor is there simply nothing there—for being is also not absent from 'truth beauty'; it is it not not-there, but just implied.

And the thesis of the poem—if we may speak of a thesis—is that being is implied. Or more precisely: being is not what has been thought in the Western tradition (a tradition dominated by the history of philosophy as metaphysics) as a thing or substance, matter or form, attribute or quality, particular or universal, God or totality, transcendent or transcendental 'concept', ego or mind; it is not just a word or idea, nor simply essence or existence, nor some kind of permutation or combination thereof; nor is it an illusion or nothing at all, *nihil negativum*; nor is it truth or beauty or anything else—it is an implication.

But Keats is not the first to use being in this way—or rather, not to use it. Indeed, being is often just implied, whether in English or Greek, Russian or Hebrew. For example, a fragment from Heraclitus (B119): *ēthos anthrōpō daimōn*. One translation reads: 'a person's character *is* his divinity'.<sup>2</sup> Another reads: 'Man's character *is* his fate'.<sup>3</sup> But the verb 'to be' does not appear in the original Greek text; nor is it absent, nor merely some combination or permutation of present and absent—for it is neither. It is, however, implied (whether its aspect is complete or incomplete).<sup>4</sup>

And not only in philosophy, but in poetry as well: being is implied. Just one example, although it would be easy to multiply them—not because implication is just another poetic use of language or common literary trope; but rather, if it is poetic, it is because it is implied. A line from Homer's *Illiad* reads: *kreissōn gar basileus hote chōsetai andri cherēi*. And A.T. Murray translates: 'For mightier *is* a king, when he is angry at a lesser man'.<sup>5</sup> But again: being is not present; the verb *einai* (to be) is neither here nor there—and yet nor is it nowhere or nothing—for it is implied.

So if being is implied in the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', if being's way of being implied is what the poem is about, it is because implication is the secret of the poem. And Keats keeps this secret (that 'is', being, is implied by 'truth beauty') hidden in full-view, speaks of it silently to everyone who would listen—almost like that which Wordsworth calls 'the burthen of the mystery'.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, being *qua* implication is the 'still unravish'd bride of quietness', that haunts the poem. It is not the child, but the 'foster-child of silence'—for this bride does not merely keep silent; it is not simply the child of silence (insofar as it implies, however quietly, which is not to say that it breaks its silence, or speaks—for implication does not just speak). Implication is the poem's sweet melody that cannot be heard, the ditty of no tone; it is that which the lover cannot kiss, the meaning which can be approached, but never grasped. And if such an implication is the end, it is no wonder that we can only get 'near the goal'—for like the 'Bold Lover' (or lover of wisdom), who cannot kiss, so too that which is implied cannot come to be, nor come to presence and

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<sup>2</sup> R.D. McKirahan, *A Presocratics Reader* (Hackett, 1996), p. 40; my emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> C.H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 81; my emphasis. I have taken up Heidegger's reading of Heraclitus in *The Irony of Heidegger*, Chapt. 4.

<sup>4</sup> See for example: Plato, *Laws* X, 901c8-d2. I have addressed issues of implication in 'Being and Implication: On Hegel and the Greeks', *Cosmos and History*, Vol. III, No. 3, 2007; and in *Unity and Aspect* (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> A.T. Murray, *Illiad* (Harvard University, 1924), 1.80; my emphasis.

<sup>6</sup> W. Wordsworth, 'Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abby', London: J. & A. Arch, 1798.

present itself, reveal or demonstrate, explain or explicate itself, make its meaning clear and distinct, nor determine the necessary grounds for why it cannot do so.

So 'is' is implied by 'truth beauty'. That is what the poem implies: is, the verb 'to be', being. That is what the poem is about: being *qua* implied, implied being. What is poetic about the poem? The way in which being is implied. Obviously, in 'Beauty is truth', the 'is' is there, present; it comes to presence as itself and appears as what it is, as the relation of beauty to truth—the *phainomenon* of being comes to light. But in 'truth beauty', the 'is' is not simply there, although neither is it just not there; it is not merely present, although nor is it absent. Where is the 'is' of 'truth beauty'? Neither here nor there. How is it? Neither present nor absent. What is it? An implication.

What does it mean then, to say that the 'is', being, is implied by 'truth beauty'? First, it means that it must be implied; it is a necessary implication—for it follows necessarily, apodeictically, from 'truth is beauty'. The 'is' must be carried over, transported, transferred, from the first half of the phrase to the second. 'Beauty is truth' means that 'truth' necessarily is 'beauty'. And if 'truth beauty' lacked the verb 'to be', if the 'is' were not implied, if being were not a necessary implication, then it would be nonsense, meaningless—or at least incomplete, an incomplete sentence. But thanks to the implied 'is' in the first half, the second half is complete, comprehensible, sensible and meaningful. We understand that which the poem or the poet or the urn necessarily says, even if it is not spoken, even if the 'is' remains in silence—for being is implied universally, or more precisely: more universal than any universal, being is a necessary implication. Thus 'truth beauty' implies 'truth is beauty'—and necessarily so.

But how is it possible for 'truth beauty' to necessarily imply 'is'? How can being to be implied at all? What is the possibility of the necessity of implied being? What makes it possible for 'truth beauty' to say 'truth is beauty'?

In fact, if 'is' must be stuck between truth and beauty, if being is necessarily implied, if 'truth beauty' must mean 'truth is beauty', then it is because this necessity is already somehow far more possible. Indeed, 'truth beauty' is that which first makes 'truth is beauty' possible. Or rather, 'is' is possible thanks to the fact that it is not simply there, present (nor merely elsewhere and absent), but implied—and so can possibly be brought to presence (out of absence) at anytime whatsoever. We understand that the urn can imply 'truth is beauty' because it is possible to add it in, supply that which is missing, remember the forgotten, carry over what is there in the first phrase into that which is not in the second, so correct the 'error' of an incomplete sentence and make it complete, fill the gap, overcome the lack, actualize the potential, let it come to presence and appear as a phenomenon, answer the question, affirm the 'negative capability' that lies between truth and beauty. So if Keats does not simply stick an 'is' between truth and beauty, it is because that would destroy the 'is' which is just implied; writing being would translate its *dynamis* into the work, *en-ergia*, metamorphose possibility into actuality—it would metamorphose the negative capability into a positive one. Thus by implying being as a possibility, the implied 'is' as possible, the poem shows that 'being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts' is not just a necessity.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ironically or not, this concept, which has kept scholars busy for centuries, only appears once: "I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats's letter to George and Tom Keats, 21 27 (?) December 1817). Cf. J. Reibetanz, "'The Whitsun Weddings': Larkin's Reinterpretation of Time and Form in Keats's, *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Autumn, 1976), p. 529).

If being is not just necessarily implied by ‘truth beauty’, but a possibility for it; or if the necessity of supplementing truth and beauty with ‘is’ comes out of the fact that it is possible to do so—well, how is that possible? What is the possibility of this possibility? Or how is it possible for ‘truth beauty’ to be (negatively or positively, possibly or necessarily) capable of implying ‘truth is beauty’? How is it possible for the urn to say that being is implied by ‘truth beauty’?

Indeed, if the possibility of implying ‘is’ between truth and beauty cannot explain its own possibility—nor can it simply be necessary, or possible—well then, it would seem that we have a problem. Or rather that ‘truth beauty’ is a problem, even *the* problem of the poem, and of poetry, Keats’s problem and the urn’s, truth’s and beauty’s and ours. And that is precisely the name for the kind of being implied by ‘truth beauty’, that is, problematic. The ‘is’ then, that ‘truth beauty’ implies, is a problem; it is implied in a way that is problematic. But what is the problem?

On the one hand, the problem is deciding whether ‘truth beauty’ necessarily or possibly implies ‘truth is beauty’, whether being is actually and necessarily or potentially and possibly implied—and whether we can decide at all. For prior to judging the necessity or possibility of the ‘is’, it is neither—and ‘we first judge something problematically’.<sup>8</sup> Suspended between (before or beyond) necessity and possibility, being is a problem; and its way of being is problematic. And it is out of such a problem that ‘is’ necessarily or possibly comes to be between truth and beauty; it is because of this problem that the urn says ‘truth beauty’ and must or can mean ‘truth is beauty’. For problematic implication is the origin of necessary and possible implication alike—and being is the problem of the poem (implicated in its poetry), even before it necessarily or possibly comes to be implied between truth and beauty.

On the other hand, the problem is determining that anything is being implied at all. For perhaps ‘truth beauty’ implies nothing, and the ‘is’ must not and cannot be carried over from ‘beauty is truth’. So the problem is not that being is implied in a necessary or possible way, nor whether we can decide which, nor that something other than being may be implied (some other verb which also implies being)—nor that it is necessarily or possibly not implied; but that we might have to suspend judgment about whether being is being implied at all. Then the problem of implication is implication itself. For the ‘is’ is neither present nor absent between truth and beauty. And the poetry of the poem might not lie in how it speaks without being necessarily there, nor possibly; but rather so that its non-presence (or absence) is just as much of a problem as its presence.

The problem then, or double-problem, of ‘truth beauty’, the problem of the poem, is that the implied ‘is’ is neither necessary nor possible, present nor absent. Or more precisely, insofar as being is the problem of the ‘Ode’, it is because it is merely implied. But this problem just as much implies a chance to go back and re-read the poem as a work about being, about being *qua* implication, especially if it is implicated in the other things the poem is also on about: truth, beauty, knowledge, need, mortality, friendship, the Greeks and us. Such a problematic reading (whether also somehow necessary or possible as well, or not) might then be a poetry of implying. So here it is again:

1.

THOU still unravish’d bride of quietness,  
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,  
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express

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<sup>8</sup> I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A76/B101.

A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:  
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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?  
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Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
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That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,  
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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.

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O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede  
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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.