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Three Poets: Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium," and Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar."

What is the role of art and the artist in a post-Christian world, when ordinary man no longer feels, no longer acknowledges the divine? But the desire for transcendence remains, the desire that there *must* be something beyond man because man dies. Wherein is meaning? Wherein is hope? Whereas ordinary man works in his everyday world, a *Dasein* anesthetized with work and bills and everyday worries, and another man looks towards technology and science to fill in the void, the loss of God, the artist remains keenly aware of the dark void of the loss of the divine, and it is working through this psychic darkness that the artist gives, perhaps not a solution but an articulation of the problem, of the loss, of the desire for a return to wholeness, that the desire for a wholeness that transcends man is still there. In John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," William Butler Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium," and Wallace Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar" one sees three poets striving to articulate what is the role of art and the artist in such a cold, seemingly godless world.

Keats, as a late Romantic, would like to see Nature as the healing power of man's loss, but death is also a part of Nature, and thus he writes an ekphrasis, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" describing an urn that displays eternal scenes. The voice is a poet, speaking to the urn as a "still unravished bride of quietness" (1). Stanza one introduces the idea that this urn is

better than the poets “rhyme” because the urn is static and cannot change. The urn is complete, having both “deities or mortals” (6), “men or gods... maidens” (8), and there is action in the urn “mad pursuit” (9). But it is action that can take its time, as heard in the spondee “slow time” (2). Stanza two continues the voice’s admiration of the urn’s eternal song: “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter” (11-12). The young lovers in the second stanza will never fall out of love, the trees will never lose their leaves, and the beloved will never grow old and die (15-16, 19-20). However, the voice does introduce a problem – the lover will never kiss her, as he is frozen just enough apart from her (18). As if in alarm of this problem, the voice repeats “happy” six times in the third stanza (which makes one think, “The voice doth protests too much). Not surprisingly, one finds a turn in stanza four – instead of lovers one sees a sacrifice (31), an empty town (36-37), silence (39), and desolation (40). The problem of this urn’s expression of song is that the urn gives a “Cold Pastoral!” (45), a phrase that breaks the nearly seamless series of iambic pentameters so far in stanza five with a spondee and an iamb, reminding one of “slow time”. Yes, man can only find truth through beauty, such as seen on this urn. But the problem is that this beauty is “Cold”, and thus, ultimately dead.

With Modernity, poets are aware of the deadness of art, as seen in Yeats’ “Sailing to Byzantium.” In the first stanza, the voice sees himself, a poet, as one of “old men” whose ability to sing is outstripped by the “birds in the trees” because of the ossification of poetic expression, “Monuments of unaging intellect” (8). In stanza two, the voice describes an old man as “A tattered coat upon a stick” (10) – a worn out body with a “Soul” that is supposed to sing but “there [are no] singing school” (13) because those who would be singers are

only studying the songs, not singing them – “Monuments of its own magnificence” (14). Therefore, the voice has left this dry, worn world for “the seas” and “the holy city of Byzantium” (15-16), which are images of death, renewal, rebirth, and mystery. In stanza three, the voice calls upon “sages” like the epic poet of old, calling upon his muse. But instead of giving inspiration for song, the voice asks the sages to “Consume my heart away” (21) and “gather me / Into the artifice of eternity” (23). In other words, he desires the sages to turn him into art, for he is unable to be an artist. Thus, in stanza four, one sees the image of an artificial singer, alluding to the mechanical nightingale which kept the Emperor amused. Unable to compete with the natural birds, which speak of birth and death (6), the voice will become an artificial bird, only speaking of “what is past, or passing, or to come” (32), an awful timelessness reminiscent of the “Cold Pastoral” of the Grecian Urn.

In contrast, the active poet returns in Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar.” In three short stanzas we hear a strong active “I”: “I placed a jar in Tennessee” (1). The rhythm is strongly regular throughout in iambic tetrameter, stressing the voice’s artifice of the poem. Stanza one sees the artist’s jar – his artwork -- forcing “slovenly” (3) nature to acknowledge it, strongly put with the iamb / spondee line “Surround that hill” (4). Stanza two stresses the power of the jar to subdue nature, which is “no longer wild” (6). The jar, unlike the Grecian Urn, has an active power, a “dominion” felt beyond itself (9). This dominion, however, is ambiguous – is this power good or evil? This ambiguity is further expressed by the fact that the jar itself is blank, “gray and bare” (10), unlike the filled pastoral of the Grecian Urn. The jar does not reflect or imitate nature – “it did not give of bird or bush, / Like nothing else in Tennessee” (11-12), but perhaps something beyond it, what Longinus calls the “Sublime.”

The blankness of the jar is the void of the Abyss, the lost path to the divine, which forces anyone who sees the jar to submit to the mystery which it holds.

Thus, one sees in Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium," and Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar" three examples of poets striving to articulate what is the role of art and the artist in a cold, seemingly godless world. One can perhaps see these three as three stages of the poet returning to himself: 1) the initial inkling that perhaps the artist and his art is inadequate, 2) the despair of the artist, and 3) the return of the artist to a simpler art, to an awful courage to become bare before his art. The role of the artist and his art remain ambiguous throughout, but in the third movement one sees a glimmer of hope, submission to mystery.

Works Cited

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