

# Say What You Still See:

## Stasis and pastoral imagery in John Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1819) and Leigh Hunt's 'The Calendar of Nature [May]' (1819)

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*This paper interrogates similar examples of stasis in pastoral imagery in John Keats's poem 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and Leigh Hunt's magazine column 'The Calendar of Nature [May]', both written in 1819 by the two most-prominent members of the 'Cockney School'. In particular, the intention is to show that both the poem and the column being examined are united in a complex and nuanced deployment of static pastoral imagery that simultaneously raises the potential for inversion, mutability, and conclusion. While there is demonstrable tension between stasis and penultimacy haunting the short lyric poem and the journalism, both Keats and Hunt present the 'sense of an ending' as something that both emerges from – and maintains – stasis, rather than undermines it.*

Dead poets (or rather, the dead, regardless of their former praxis) do not deploy the written word to communicate. Yet John Keats, writing to Charles Armitage Brown on 30 November 1820, speaks (writes) and 'will not speak' (write) of his death: 'I have a habitual feeling of my real life having past, and that I am leading a posthumous existence. God knows how it would have been – but it appears to me – however, I will not speak of that subject'.<sup>1</sup> There are, bound in these two sentences, two orders of language that resist initial understanding. Firstly, considering simple narration, Keats introduces a subject and then explicitly rejects and casts off that subject. Secondly, addressing epistemology, Brown received (perceptual) evidence for believing the proposition 'Keats's life has not "past"'. There is a purpose to this brief exercise; the point is not to willfully reread or misread Keats's aesthetic decisions in his final letter nor is it simply to (re)state that proof by contradiction can function in such a way that the proposition's negation can itself be proven true by the very form through which the proposition is communicated (despite his untimely death shortly after this on 23 February 1821). Instead, examining Keats's articulation of his 'habitual feeling' of death ahead of death and 'posthumous existence' arrests us precisely because it so vividly

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<sup>1</sup> John Keats, '30 November 1820 (Charles Armitage Brown)', in *Selected Letters*, ed. by Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 369–370 (p. 369).

reminds us of his own (and others') short lyric poetry, which characteristically 'compresses language in a way that resists initial easy comprehension'.<sup>2</sup> Posthumous Keats, ironically, brings the actions and outputs of living Keats to the forefront of his final letter: etymologically, the endearing, diffident adverb of his sign-off – 'I always made an awkward bow'<sup>3</sup> – comes from 'awk', to be 'directed the other way or in the wrong direction',<sup>4</sup> which is equally fitting and serves as a reminder that this Keats, the writer of non-fiction prose, is never more than a turn of phrase away from Keats, the writer of fictional poetry. To the texts at hand: both Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and Leigh Hunt's 'The Calendar of Nature [May]' are the concern of this paper precisely because they require a distinct mode of interpretation that resists both the personal connection between Keats and Hunt, the Cockney School attacks that condemn both their authors, and their proximity in production (Spring and Summer 1819). That is: deployed in parallel, interpretations of 'Grecian Urn' and of 'Calendar of Nature' not only elucidate the way in which both texts demonstrate a nuanced conception of stasis in pastoral imagery, but this deployment provides a greater understanding of both texts. Particularly, our understanding of the seminal 'Grecian Urn' – and the way in which we 'read' the short lyric poem's imagery, metaphors, and synesthesia – is enriched in light of the lesser-known 'Calendar of Nature' magazine column.

If 'Nothing is so difficult as beginning | In poesy',<sup>5</sup> Keats experienced no such arduousness in mid-1819 when he underwent a period of intense productivity and wrote five of his six seminal odes.<sup>6</sup> While the chronological order and (if any) interpretive sequences are unclear, critical tradition places 'Ode to Psyche' first and September's 'To Autumn' last. 'Grecian Urn' – published later in January 1820's *Annals of the Fine Arts* – opens with the sort of 'awkward bow'<sup>7</sup> (read: uneasy deference) that closes Keats's final letter:

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 [...]<sup>8</sup>

The speaker of Keats's ekphrasis begins their address to the nameless-yet-locospecified urn – an artefact and thus never the auditor – in a nuanced way that is

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Lamarque, 'Semantic Finegrainedness and Poetic Value', in *The Philosophy of Poetry*, ed. by John Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 18–36 (p. 19).

<sup>3</sup> Keats, 'To Charles Armitage Brown (30 November 1820)', p. 370.

<sup>4</sup> *OED* [online], 'Awk', <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/13967?redirectedFrom=awk#eid>> [accessed 8 February 2019].

<sup>5</sup> Lord Byron, 'Don Juan', in *Selected Poems of Lord Byron: Including Don Juan and Other Poems*, ed. by Paul Wright (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), pp. 51–557 (IV. ll. 1–2).

<sup>6</sup> Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1963), pp. 525–527.

<sup>7</sup> Keats, '30 November 1820', p. 370.

<sup>8</sup> John Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', in *The Major Works*, ed. by Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 288–289 (ll. 1–4).

illuminated when read alongside the opening of May 1819's edition of Hunt's 'Calendar of Nature' series, published in *The Examiner* throughout that year: 'Towards the end of the month, indeed, as it stands at present, if a very great blight does not occur, the treasures of summer are almost laid open.'<sup>9</sup> Both Keats's speaker and Hunt deploy the same technique: they are defining the present, pastoral scene in the negative. Attending to the detail, Keats has not applied negation to the entire sentence or even a clause, but deploys the privative prefix 'un-' to invert and, in this case, subvert the value of the 'ravish'd' stem. The urn, then, is presented to the reader in the first instance as having the overtly specific quality of not having been seized by force and – to further unpick the logical implications of the linguistic compression – defined by its matrimonial and adoptive relationship to quietness and silence respectively. Hunt is similarly specific: the only risk posed to his desired 'treasures of summer' and the expected, positive trajectory is 'blight'. While the former's 'presumably innocent, pastoral love raises the spectre of rape, as maidens loath try to evade pursuit',<sup>10</sup> the latter raises the spectre of infestation, disease, and decay. Any criticism of Hunt's writing must be framed by his own idiosyncratic attitude towards literary language and its implications. While Hunt remains more well known for his journalism than his poetry, Richard Cronin's criticism of Hunt's *The Story of Rimini* (1816) – with its unusual diction such as 'vests attir'd [...] colours fir'd', 'lightsome' as an adjective for both the fit of a hat and the manner in which horses are led, crowds painted as 'rank agreeing', inanimate objects rendered (somehow) 'half-indifferent', and colours graspable as the tactile-cum-ocular 'purple smearings' and 'yellow thickening bright' – becomes a salient touchpoint for the reader of 'Calendar of Nature'. Cronin formulates Hunt's stance as one of 'knowing innocence' in which he writes 'as if' language itself was not defined by 'cultural authority', 'as if' he was simply 'unaware'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, even the briefest consideration of 'private language' – where words 'refer to what only the speaker can know – to [their] immediate private sensations' away from rule-governed language<sup>12</sup> – leaves us questioning whether the sign is operational (meaningful) when considered alongside 'correct' usage. That is: it is necessary, in the context of Hunt's output, to scrutinise an example of language that may – at first – seem supplementary or included for 'balance'. Both Keats's poem and Hunt's column open by offering the reading an idealised, pastoral scene, but one primarily defined through the absence of harm and disaster while in the same instance raising the specific, latent potential for said harm and disaster.

Such a reading of the first four lines of Keats's lyrical poem (one contingent on the extended implications of 'unravish'd', an adjective neither particularly technical nor obscure) easily assimilates – and neatly adheres to – the notion that the 'proper language of poetry is in fact nothing different from that of real life' and, as such, poets must 'use

<sup>9</sup> Leigh Hunt, 'Calendar of Nature [May]', *The Examiner* (9 May 1819), p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Andrea Henderson, 'Mastery and Melancholy in Suburbian', *The Eighteenth Century*, 50.3 (2009), 221–242 (p. 239).

<sup>11</sup> Richard Cronin, 'Keats and the Politics of Cockney Style', *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, 36.4 (1996), 785–806 (p. 789).

<sup>12</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 243.

as much as possible an actual, existing language',<sup>13</sup> which can thus be interpreted with the same 'real' method. This declaration could quite easily be lifted from *Lyrical Ballads*' preface with its 'real language of men'<sup>14</sup> but actually comes from the preface of Hunt's *Rimini*. Having defined May by its absence of catastrophe, that same writer of *Rimini* progresses his magazine column with a more towards more detailed imagery: 'The grass is in its greenest beauty; the young corn has covered the more naked fields; the hedges are powdered with the snowy and sweet-scented blossoms of the hawthorn, as beautiful as myrtle-flowers'.<sup>15</sup> This earlier absence is met with abundance: pastures are described in the superlative green, previously naked fields have been 'clothed', and Hunt deploys both sight and scent in describing the cultivated divides between said fields. Something remains unaddressed and unassimilated in that summary: the metaphoric comparison 'as beautiful as myrtle-flowers'. Myrtle is not just dense with interpretative potential (Harmodius and Aristogeiton; Demeter and Aphrodite) but indicative of a nuanced toying with temporality as Hunt presents May's hawthorns in comparison to a plant that does not flower until late summer (and therefore, in the seasonal cycle expected but yet-to-occur in 1819): the hawthorn of 1819 is as beautiful as the myrtle yet-to-be of 1819 and either meaning threatens to collapse in the specific temporal setting or we must read Hunt as appealing to a memory of myrtle-signalled beauty. Taking the most reasonable explanation, the latter, this appeal to transcendent beauty and the form of myrtle ironically jars with the inwardness of the pastoral scene and – by extension – stasis itself. Consider Peter Lamarque (challenging Donald Davidson's assertion that we must deal with what 'words mean in their literal application and the rest is merely effect' and thus metaphoric meaning does not exist as there is nothing to 'paraphrase'): poetry demands 'the kind of normative experiences' that make it extraordinarily difficult to rely on the idea that metaphor is 'inexhaustible' with 'unconstrained effects'.<sup>16</sup> Consider Ronald de Sousa: metaphor is central to 'density', contributed to by 'everything likely to concentrate the greatest load of meaning into as few words as possible'.<sup>17</sup> Now, consider poetry, consider Keats, whose speaker relays more questions than answers:

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?<sup>18</sup>

The rhythmic predictability of Keats's iambic pentameter ironically contrasts with the accelerating severity: the maidens, participants in the first question through their

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<sup>13</sup> Leigh Hunt, *The Story of Rimini: A Poem* (London: J. Murray, 1816), p. xv.

<sup>14</sup> S. T. Coleridge and William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2003), p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Hunt, 'Calendar of Nature', p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> Lamarque, 'Semantic Finegrainedness and Poetic Value', pp. 27–28.

<sup>17</sup> Ronald de Sousa, 'The Dense and the Transparent: Reconciling Opposites', in *The Philosophy of Poetry*, ed. by John Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 37–62 (p. 38).

<sup>18</sup> Keats, 'Grecian Urn', ll. 7–10.

‘loth[ing]’, are swiftly relegated to become the subservient aspect of the ‘mad pursuit’ and the subsequent ‘struggle’. Both the ‘pursuit’ and ‘struggle’ are, of course, metaphorical: given the paraphrase; given the fact this is not literally applicable; given the still images of the urn. The ‘quietness’, ‘silence’, and ‘slow time’ barely register as we are compelled to examine the speaker’s interrogative pronoun-led shorter statements inside short lines that lead to this culmination despite – rather than due to – Keats’s chosen meter. Engaging with the precise semantic descriptions of nature in Hunt’s column and Keats’s ekphrasis reiterates and elucidates the detail that – in presenting positive images and fixed notions – the reader is continually confronted with peripheral mutability and other challenges to the supposed-stasis of this naturalistic imagery.

A tension, therefore, is haunting the speaker of the ‘Grecian Urn’ and Hunt as they convey their naturalistic imagery: the tension between stasis and penultimacy. Inherent to the texts’ description of nature’s stasis is an implication of change. In a moment of theoretical near-synesthesia, the tension inherent in the speakers’ ‘reading’ of ‘visual’ nature, is best advanced and understood through their presentation of unwearied auralness. In ‘Calendar of Nature’, the chirping avians are not ‘unravish’d’ but sing with ‘unwearied love, while their partners are sitting; the later birds of passage arrive’.<sup>19</sup> Once more, the specific preclusion of a certain, specific condition (weariness) in itself raises the latent potential for eventual weariness, but what is notable here is the idea of ‘later’ birds who, in the present participle, ‘arrive’.<sup>20</sup> Thus, when we move beyond this surface-level and unifying ‘unwear[iness]’, we find a stark temporal division between two groups in the present, supposed-collective: those present and those (non)present until recently. We should listen again: in ‘Grecian Urn’, the speaker – still examining the surface of the eponymous, man-made vessel – traces a ‘happy melodist, unwearied | For ever piping songs for ever new’ after declaring that:

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 [...] <sup>21</sup>

In a movement that takes the reader to the brink of sensual collapse, the speaker ‘says’ what he ‘hears’ when he ‘reads’ the urn by deploying the medium of taste. This is not the sole instance in Keats’s oeuvre where he conflates the act of tasting and hearing: the speaker of ‘To [Mary Frogley]’ similarly offers up the ‘sweetness | of thy honied voice’ and ‘sweet privacy’.<sup>22</sup> Marshall Brown’s argument that ‘Grecian Urn’ presents an ‘even sweeter’, idealised version of existence<sup>23</sup> does not, however, address the metric qualities

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<sup>19</sup> Hunt, ‘Calendar of Nature’, p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Keats, ‘Grecian Urn’, ll. 23–24, ll. 10–13.

<sup>22</sup> John Keats, ‘To [Mary Frogley]’, in *Poems* (London: Ollier, 1817), pp. 36–39 (ll. 23–24).

<sup>23</sup> Marshall Brown, ‘Unheard Melodies: The Forces of Form’, *PLMA*, 107.3 (1992), 465–481 (p. 467).

at play: ‘unheard’ and ‘Not to’, a trochee and a spondee, respectively, distort the regular meter and draw the reader’s attention once more to absence rather than presence. The ode, with its combination of Shakespearean quatrains and Miltonic sestets, is clearly distinct from the poetic form that marks Hunt’s and Keats’s earlier work (and, broadly, the Cockney School of Poetry), but there is merit in attending closely to a notable aesthetic statement formed by the ‘Unheard’ and ‘endear’d’ couplet. ‘Unheard’ and ‘endear’d’ do not merely half-rhyme but, as Susan J. Wolfson convincingly argues, their combination results in a ‘sight rhyme’ and ‘syllabic dislodging’ of ‘end’ and ‘eared’. Thus, the couplet arrestingly becomes ‘unheard | end’ due to this syllabic dislodging, rather than ‘unheard | endear’d’.<sup>24</sup> What we can hear – the ‘lisp[ing] sedition’,<sup>25</sup> to reappropriate a comment from the earlier Cockney School of Poetry attacks – is the sibilance of ‘melodies are sweet’ and ‘soft pipes’ coupled with the looming danger of an ‘unheard end’ to the stasis of nature in the text. Notably, in the context of this study of imagery, it is only by attending closely to rhyme (far removed, formally, from Keats’s and Hunt’s earlier reformed heroic couplets) that this ‘unheard end’ can be ‘heard’, but this is a far less problematic or ironic dynamic than the reader may initially believe. The power and prominence of this looming ‘end’ depend on it being noticed: ‘heard’, as it were. In a text dominated by multifaceted, supposedly-static naturalistic scenes, these images routinely raise their own potential for imminent inversion, but here we find this particular sense of an ‘end[ing]’ not in tension with the naturalistic imagery but in tandem, emerging from that same stasis. The happy melodist plays on; the ‘end’ is neither ‘heard’ nor ‘unheard’ for the precise reason that it can never come to fruition, yet hangs over the poem, like a quiet bower.

It is not just sensual naturalistic imagery but human interaction with this Keatsian-Huntian natural environment that should interest us here. While Keats’s maidens exist in ‘mad pursuit’,<sup>26</sup> Hunt’s farmer is – in sharp contrast – a far less active and dynamic agent:

[...] the farmer does little, but leisurely weed his garden, and enjoy the sight of his flowering industry; the sun stops long, and begins to let us feel him warmly; and when the vital sparkle of the day is over, in sight and sound, the nightingale still continues to tell us its joy; and the little glow-worm lights up her trusting lamp, to shew her lover where she is.<sup>27</sup>

This pastoral scene – with the heat of the sun just beginning to move from a theoretical possibility to an a posteriori warmth – raises, again, the cold spectre of stasis ending (and, indeed, with the ‘little glow-worm’ poised to ‘light’ the evening for her lover). Still,

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<sup>24</sup> Susan J. Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 320.

<sup>25</sup> Z., ‘On the Cockney School of Poetry No.IV’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 3 (August 1818), p. 524.

<sup>26</sup> Keats, ‘Grecian Urn’, l. 9.

<sup>27</sup> Hunt, ‘Calendar of Nature’, p. 16.

however, we find this ‘still’, this continuity throughout it all, in a way that subtly summons Keats’s ‘still stedfast, still unchangeable’ ‘Bright Star’ utterance.<sup>28</sup> Hunt cannot quite bid ‘adieu’, with the nightingale’s song continuing in perpetuity at the close of his column; Keats’s boughs cannot bid ‘adieu’ to Spring itself:

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 [...]<sup>29</sup>

In a poem littered with images of a ‘mysterious priest’, a ‘peaceful citadel’ being ‘emptied’ as its population decants from town to ceremony, and ‘marble men and maidens overwrought’,<sup>30</sup> it is still this ‘happy melodist’ who captures our attention with his unparalleled dynamism. That is: his actions are framed by the premise of being ‘for ever new’, ‘warm’, ‘young’, and ‘panting’. The present participle state of both the latter and ‘piping’ itself wed two moments of expressional intensity – one bodily, one artistic – that are locked in stasis on the side of the urn. Anaphora abound, happiness and permanence are similarly wed. John Beer’s observation that ‘happy’ has a reduced significance for ‘modern’ readers,<sup>31</sup> while notable, fails to address the fact that the sheer concentration of repetition evokes ‘more’ happiness than can be contained on the side of the artefact. That repetition is the true centre of gravity here, rather than the emotive power of the adjective. Paul D. Sheats rightly positions Keats as more Wordsworthian than William Wordsworth; while the latter ‘praised the power of the spatial art to halt time’, the former transfigures that same power ‘by adding what only poetry can give: life, warmth, and breath’.<sup>32</sup> To extend Sheats’ assertion to its logical conclusion: the ‘life, warmth, and breath’ in ‘Grecian Urn’ are contingent on a ‘halt[ing]’ of time’ that renders action not merely unresolved or in media res but actively raises, time and time again, the very fact that this stasis could give way to change, disequilibrium, and an ending. To appreciate the splendor of being ‘for ever warm’, we recognise that warmth, by its nature, will always leave the body; to accept that something is ‘still to be enjoyed’, we recognise that enjoyment, by its nature, is transient.

In ‘Calendar of Nature’ and ‘Grecian Urn’, we encounter stasis both in the pastoral scene summoned by Hunt’s journalism and in the naturalistic images that

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<sup>28</sup> John Keats, ‘Bright Star’, in *The Major Works*, ed. by Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 325 (l. 9).

<sup>29</sup> Keats, ‘Grecian Urn’, ll. 21–27.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 32; ll. 36–37; l. 42.

<sup>31</sup> Gillian Beer, ‘Aesthetic Debate in Keats’s Odes’, *The Modern Language Review*, 64.4 (1969), 742–748 (p. 747).

<sup>32</sup> Paul D. Sheats, ‘Keats and the Ode’, *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. by Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 86–101 (p. 93).

Keats's speaker 'reads' on the side of the vessel. Throughout the poetry and the journalism, considered engagement with the very semantics of negation, the latent potential for self-inversion, the peripheral mutability, and the looming 'end' demonstrate that – far from ultimately collapsing this stasis – these supposed threats are structurally inherent and systemically significant to both the creation and maintenance of stasis. This is the central 'awkward bow'<sup>33</sup> of 'Calendar of Nature' and 'Grecian Urn'; the very aspects that may reasonably be expected to undermine stasis simultaneously confirm the stasis of imagery by the very fact that they are neatly assimilated by it, thus becoming confirmation of the very literary and journalistic device that ought to be undone. While the 'silent form' of the urn and 'treasures of summer' evoked in the column 'dost tease us out of thought' (and direct us, as readers, towards uncovering the end of stasis, the tipping point of penultimacy, and thus the movement from doing to done and from what is yet-to-be to what is), consistent interrogation of stasis in both 'Calendar of Nature' and 'Grecian Urn' leads us to conclude that it 'shalt remain'<sup>34</sup> still, steadfast, and unwaverig

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<sup>33</sup> Keats, '30 November 1820', p. 370.

<sup>34</sup> Keats, 'Grecian Urn', l. 44; l. 47.

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