John Keats tells his readers the story, in “Ode to a Grecian Urn,” of a poet’s (and maybe his own) attempt to ravish an urn—that is, to demonstrate the superior status of the spoken word, of the poetic mind in action, and of the poet, to a beautiful, lasting, but static object of sculptural/visual art. In the first three stanzas the poet conveys efficacy and superiority as he manipulates the “sweet” (4) urn and “its” images to service his own self-image. However, in promoting himself through his self-reflexive involvement with the plight of those frozen on the urn’s surface, he is suddenly reminded of his own inescapable susceptibility to decay, and of his own inevitable demise. Reminded of his own need of a “friend” (44), of reassurances from someone/thing alien and superior to himself he could imagine having access to or as being linked to penultimate truths (to “eternity” [45]), in the closing stanza, the poet changes his intentions toward the urn. In the last stanza, that is, rather than ravish it, the poet attempts to restore to it the formidable powers of expression he had previously downplayed and undermined.

The poet dearly wants us to imagine not only that a rivalry exists between the urn and himself, but that the outcome of this contest is undetermined. The urn, we are told in the very first line, is “still unravished.” We intuit that he means that the urn is as yet unravished—at least by its groom, “quietness” (1). Perhaps, we are encouraged to ask ourselves, with his rhyme, with his voice, the poet might yet accomplish what quietness could not—namely, a charged, oratorical, even “orgiastic” (Friedman 226) conquest of the beautiful urn.

In the first stanza the poet skillfully demonstrates how he can use figurative language to undermine (undress) the authority and prowess of (off of) the urn. The poet gives lip-service to the urn’s powers, and confesses the inability of his own rhyme to match the “sweet[ness]” (4) of its “express[ion]” (3), but his personification of the urn actually makes it mostly seem vulnerable and passive. By calling the urn a “foster-child” in the second line, he makes the urn seem abandoned, and thereby further emphasizes our sense of the urn as vulnerable. Further, he portrays it as a vulnerable creation, and thereby draws attention to the generative capacities of those who “birthed” it. When we are subsequently told that the urn “express[es] / A flowery tale” (3-4), the status of the urn as the story’s teller seems to us uncertain, unfixed, even unearned. If the tale originates in any one, is it not, we are prompted to
ask, really the potter’s (s’) and/or the painter’s (s’) tale, told through the medium of their painted urn, as much as it is the urn’s proper? And, in making the ostensible subject of the poem the urn’s beautiful tale and/or its capacity to tell a beautiful tale, we sense the urn’s dependency on the poet’s voice to convey its unseen beauty to us. Portrayed as both vulnerable and passive, we are encouraged to suspect the urn is merely a “shape[ly]” (5) body, “dressed” (34) up prettily. Personified, its identity amounts to that of a passive (“still” [1]) virgin “child” (2), vulnerable to ravishment, dressed up by long-lost parentage, and whose very dressings (i.e., its surface tale)—a perpetual source of discomfort: not only might the urn’s images not be the surface manifestation of its own tale, it might be an imposition provided by others which forever “haunt about [the urn’s] [. . .] shape” (5).

An argument could be made that the uninterrupted sequence of questions which end the first stanza show that the poet is greatly affected by the images on the urn, even if their exact relationship to the urn is uncertain. But while most critics believe that the readers’ own desire for answers, for satiation, is likely aroused by the poet’s questions, some also sense a coordinating, scheming intelligence at work in these lines. Andrew Bennett, for one, argues that “[i]n the micro-narrative of lines 5-10, Keats prefigures the narrative movement of the next two stanzas, and, to a certain extent, the larger narrative movement of the whole poem [which he defines as ‘an attempt to capture the virgin meaning of the urn’]” (137). Since the questions relate to an anticipated sexual conquest, they remind us of the urn’s own unravished status and of the poet’s previous prompting to anticipate a ravishment of the urn. I modify Bennett’s assessment of the poet and argue that the questions, then, rather than help demonstrate the images’ power, serve instead as notice that the poet intends to capture, so as to enrapture, the virgin urn.

Further evidence that the images do not tease the poet out of narrative control is the confident manner in which he interacts with the images in the second stanza. Here he is not hoping for answers; instead, he is eager to and does dispense them. In the second, third, and fourth stanzas, in fact, the poet addresses images he portrays as sentient, as capable of hearing him, and as in desperate need of oratorical encouragement and soothing. He encourages “pipes” to “play on” (12). He uses logic to assist a “youth” (15), the “bold lover” (17), the “boughs” (21) and a “melodist” (22) to conceive of their immobility as a perpetual boon. What is inspiring his address to them, we note, is an aphorism—“Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter” (11-12)—he wills to mind. By choosing to refer to words to inspire his
involvement with the images, the poet thereby privileges them as containers of wisdom. The purported power of visual imagery is at the very least left undeveloped by this choice, and more than likely is undermined.

The poet’s involvement with the images, though superficially tender, is self-serving, even rough. It is self-serving because their ignorance and neediness call attention to his own knowledge and capacities as a healer and lover. Because the images’ immobility is the source of their plight, we take greater notice of the poet’s energetic mind as he felicitously distills and dispenses oratorical “medicine.” It is rough because he first reminds each of the images of their plights—so to draw their attention to their dependence upon him—before administering to them. He therefore is a competent healer—well suited, we think, to tend to the vulnerable virgin urn’s distress as much as those of the images’—and also a muscular lover—well endowed, we conclude, for a subsequent ravishing of the urn.

Bennett argues that the poet literally manhandles the urn as he engages with “its” images. He argues that the poet is “mak[ing] his own story” out of the images “by turning [the urn]” (142). He believes that the poet uses the image of the heifer in the fourth stanza to define his (the poet’s) relationship to the urn. He argues:

[T]he heifer which is being led to the altar is a visual double of the urn itself: “What leaf-fring’d legend haunts about thy shape” becomes “And all her silken flanks with garlands drest.” This coincidence in visual detail makes of the urn a sacrificial victim and the poet a “mysterious priest[.]” (142)

Though I conceive of his handling of these images as a turning point in the poem where the poet begins more to want to surrender his authority than assert it, I find his linking of poet to the priest to be apt. In the first three stanzas the poet is a “mysterious priest” (32): we sense in his handling of the images someone capable of great mercy but also of ritualistic (he deals with each image swiftly and efficiently) brutality. I suspect, however, that in the middle stanzas, readers experience the poet as involving himself more with the urn’s surface than with the urn proper. This is a distinction with a difference, for if we (at some level) experience his involvement with the images’ distress as him handling the physical dressings imposed upon its surface, following the logic of the poem’s developing plot, we suspect that a figurative ravishment of the urn’s body awaits us in the fifth and closing stanza.

The fifth stanza does indeed begin with renewed attention to the urn’s “shape”
and “form” (44), but we are meant to sense the urn’s power, not its depletion. In fact the disintegration attended to in this stanza is the “wast[ing]” (46) away of his own body. Why, lead to anticipate an inevitable ravishment, does the urn end up “remain[ing] [unaffected], in midst of other woe” (47)? The poet, unlike the urn, has not simply been “teas[ing]” (44) us. Instead, the portrayal of the urn in the final stanza is informed by his own vulnerability, and therefore by his own need for an empowered “friend” (48). He was able to use the immobility of the images to show up the rewards offered those living in “quick” time (as opposed to those existing in “slow time” [2], or frozen time), without simultaneously complicating his self-enhancement with incurred self-doubt, because his activity created a momentary high. However, while denizens of frozen time cannot experience the pitfalls of a changing “terrain,” the poet knows that historical time offers its traversers egregious falls as well as mountainous highs. After his happy rush, he becomes “parch[ed]” (30) and “pious” (37). He now contemplates the terror of physical degeneration that his purposeful activity had for a time kept away.

His awareness of the boon of eternal existence, and the blight of a terminal one, as well as the highly self-reflexive dynamic he created with his involvement with the images, now lead him to reflect upon his own fate. We sense this narrative turn, this sudden emergence in the poem of signs of distress, when he engages the images in the fourth stanza. He does not seem as focused. Previously, the deftness and rapidity with which he dealt with the images communicated a confident, coordinated, teleological mind. Seemingly intent on plotting the urn’s molestation, he didn’t wander. In this stanza, however, he seems more someone who is searching in earnest than someone simply on a mission—there is genuine, open inquiry here, not the certain march toward an already ascertained goal. We witness him return to questioning. And this time, rather than help service his rhetorical mastery over the urn, his questions now reflect his vulnerability and genuine uncertainty.

His relationship to the images in the fourth stanza suggests his own desire for soothing answers. It suggests their (i.e., the images’) power: the heifer and the priest seemingly lead to his conjuration of the abandoned town. Unlike the aphorism he willed forth earlier, this illusion shows his vulnerability as a man, not his capabilities as a poet. The town’s fate, we note, is one shared by those living in historical time. Much like the poet’s corporeal fate, with those who once filled its streets departed, the town is bereft, “emptied” (37) of its life-blood. The town does not receive the consoling response the poet provided the images in the second and third stanzas
with. It is, rather, left to stand, representative as it is of his own distress. Its unheard anguish airs his own call for assistance from an empowered, mysterious source, and indicates the awakening of his full awareness to this desire.

When the poet inscribes the word “silent” at the end of the fourth stanza, we should see it as awakening the poet “out of [his self-reflecting] thought[s]” (44). Aware of his own unmet needs, he turns to the “foster-child of silence” (2) with a new goal in mind. Whereas in the last stanza he originally intended to showcase the richness of oration and writing, of rhymes, and the comparative bareness of visual art, he finds himself in no mood to do so. Instead, he tries to establish for the urn the prowess he had earlier posited but had thereafter worked to deny. Whereas in the first stanza the poet established the urn’s parent as “silence” and its groom as “quietness” (1), the fifth stanza finally emphasizes and comes close to establishing its own power as a “silent form” (44). Whereas before its feminine “shape” (5) suggested its vulnerability to masculine ravishment, its shape now links it to superhuman—or rather, alien—strength. As Geraldine Friedman notes, there is a “cycle of eros that runs between the impassioned close-ups of the individual panels, beginning in strophe one, to the renouncing of passion in strophe five, where the urn becomes a distant ‘Attic shape’ [41] and ‘Cold Pastoral’ [45]” (“Erotics of Interpretation in Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’” 226). Given the urn’s classical origins, by calling it a “form” (44) the poet likens the urn’s shape to eternal, to abstract Pythagorean forms, and thereby helps neutralize the urn’s sexy physicality. The urn’s teasings in this stanza, we note, reminds him of “eternity” (45), not of sexual conquest.

The poet not only lends authority and mystery to the urn’s shape—in the fifth stanza, the images on the urn’s surface are commandingly owned by the urn itself. No longer images which haunt its shape, they constitute its “brede” (41). The urn repossesses the specific images the poet had earlier tainted with his own influence. The “[b]old lover” (17) he consoled, for instance, is now conflated within a multitude of unknown “marble men” (42): his influence upon him is humbled by the sudden algebraic multiplication of images. The urn’s authoritative repossession, its “[c]old[ness]” (45) and “[f]air attitude” (40), are, however, the perfect salves to help temper his “burning” desire for an empowered, authoritative “friend” (48). They help reconstitute the urn so that its unheard, visual, sweet stories can better serve his newly prioritized need for an assured source of wisdom.

But if he means to inflate the prowess of the urn’s shape and visual images, it
certainly seems to work against his purpose to end the poem with lines written on its surface. Yet while these written words do contest the power of pictorial/sculptural art, they still enhance the urn’s status. The lines are an aphorism, and remind the poet that it was an aphorism which inspired his commanding encounters with the urn’s images. In hopes of conclusively establishing the urn’s potency, then, the poet shows the urn’s images affecting him, offers it genuine praise, has it repossess its images, and, finally, has it make claim to the very source of his more confident involvement with it. Given the poet’s previous sinister intentions, the urn’s lines can fruitfully be imaged as molesting the legitimacy of the poet’s earlier prideful encounter with the urn. And, in mimicking the poet’s rapaciousness, the urn thereby becomes much more than a story-teller: by ridiculing the poet, and by self-reflexively establishing its own stature, the sweet urn returns to become an efficacious dispenser of sweet justice.

Works Cited