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KEATS AND THE MUSIC OF AUTUMN (1956)

With the possible exception of Coleridge, who has loomed large as a critic, the reputation of no romantic poet has in our century maintained so steady a course as that of John Keats. While Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley were being attacked or neglected, Keats was spared, mentioned with a special deference, and even given admiring critical analysis and scholarly study. In recent years especially has his better work, so often designated 'the great odes', received serious critical attention. F. R. Leavis, Kenneth Burke, Cleanth Brooks, and Allen Tate have all made appraisals and interpretations of one or more of these poems. 'Ode to a Nightingale' and 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' have been of central interest and received the fullest examination, and this is in no way surprising. It is my impression, however, that 'To Autumn' has been peculiarly neglected, that it merits greater attention, both in its own right and for its significance in the interrelatedness of all the odes, than it has received. For example, there is not a single reference to it in James R. Caldwell's excellent book *John Keats' Fancy*. Tate, in an essay primarily concerned with the Nightingale ode, writes of 'To Autumn' that it 'is a very nearly perfect piece of style but it has little to say'. This is true enough in a sense, yet I propose that it is not true in the sense in which Tate must surely be using the word *say* about a poem. Leavis, in an essay on Keats' later work, quotes Middleton Murry on 'To Autumn': 'It is a perfect and unforced utterance of the truth contained in the magic words: "Ripeness is all."' And then Leavis makes this comment: 'Such talk is extrava-

gant, and does not further the appreciation of Keats. No one could have found that order of significance in the Ode merely by inspecting the Ode itself. The ripeness with which Keats is concerned is the physical ripeness of autumn, and his genius manifests itself in the sensuous richness with which he renders this in poetry, without the least touch of artistic over-ripeness. Leavis, too, is of the opinion that the poem says little. But I believe that Murry's comment on the poem shows a valid and demonstrable insight into a part of its meaning.

Leavis' seeming dictum that we should read a poem merely by itself is both surprising and confusing. I am not prepared to say where the legitimate context of a poem begins and ends, but I would argue that a poem need not and sometimes cannot be read in such isolation. It is common enough for a reader to return to the same poem several times over the years, and to find new orders of significance. He might expand, or somehow qualify, the meaning he first found by simply using a dictionary during the second reading. After we have some familiarity with Homer, can we read the *Odyssey* as if we had never heard of the *Iliad*? Perhaps Leavis has arrived at this fallacy because Keats is close to us in time, so that his individual poems, on one order of significance, are wholly available. But surely no amount of footnoting or scholarly introduction can provide the kind of illumination for the individual poem, whether Petrarch's or Yeats', which it receives from the other works of its author, and even from the works of other authors – and finally from the stage of literacy, the general fund of knowledge, which a particular reader brings to a poem. The scholar can, of course, provide some relevant signposts and reminders. Modern critics, Leavis among them, have done a truly good deed in rescuing poetry from the morgue of scholarship *pour* scholarship, but when the poem is isolated for close analysis it may remain something less than restored if too much emphasis is put on the isolation. Although there are no 'authorities' on this

question, it is interesting to recall that two critics who have led the way toward the analytical interpretation of poetry also insisted on the reverse of isolation. In that early and long famous essay on tradition, Eliot announced that 'no poet . . . has his complete meaning alone', and his arguments are applicable to the individual poem. Ransom, evaluating and interpreting *Lycidas* in two of his earlier essays, looks backward and forward in Milton's work and suggests that the poem is 'nearly anonymous'. That the whole is greater than the sum of its parts is true not only of a poem but of a poet's whole work – or rather, this is true of better poems, and of poets whose achievement is most formidable. Fortunately, Leavis' own practice as a critic is not limited by the principle of reading a poem 'merely by itself'. As I read 'To Autumn' in the light of Keats' other poems, I shall also be working in an illumination kindled by all the writers mentioned above.

It seems generally agreed that 'To Autumn' is a rich and vivid description of nature, expertly achieved within a fairly intricate stanzaic pattern. The words are successfully descriptive (or evocative) in their phonetic qualities and rhythmic arrangement, as well as in their imagistic references. If we are familiar with Keats' other work, however, we can discover that the poem is not only rich in pictorial and sensuous details, but that it has a depth of meaning and a characteristic complexity of structure. 'To Autumn' is allied especially to the odes on Melancholy, on a Grecian Urn, and to a Nightingale. The four poems are various treatments presenting differing aspects of a single theme.

In so far as the theme is 'stated' in any of the poems, it is most clearly stated in the 'Ode on Melancholy'. In fact, if we want a general formulation of the theme, we need only quote the last stanza – especially these lines:

Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil'd Melacholy has her sovran shrine,

Though seen of none save him whose strenuous
tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine.

Keats was obviously preoccupied with the consideration that beauty and melancholy are closely related: true melancholy is to be found only in the fullness of living, in beauty, joy and delight, for these experiences make most poignant the passage of time, through which such experiences and then life itself must come to an end.

All this is clear enough in the 'Ode on Melancholy'. There is, however, the implication that the relationship between beauty and melancholy works both ways. That is, either joy or sadness is most intensely felt when it is attended by a consciousness of the experience which is opposite and yet so closely related to it. The theme, then, is more complex and subtle than the aspect of it which appears on the surface in 'Ode on Melancholy'. Other implications of the theme may be found throughout the four poems, which illuminate and clarify each other. This is not to say that the poems are merely repetitions of the same theme, which Keats had in mind before he wrote any of them. When we understand the poems we might find it more accurate to say that each is the exploration of a certain theme.

With so much of its context in mind, let us examine closely 'To Autumn'. The poem opens with an apostrophe to the season, and with a description of natural objects at their richest and ripest stage.

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves
run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells

With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy
cells.

The details about the fruit, the flowers and the bees constitute a lush and colorful picture of autumn and the effects of the 'maturing sun'. In the final lines of the first stanza, however, slight implications about the passage of time begin to operate. The flowers are called 'later', the bees are assumed to think that 'warm days will never cease', and there is a reference to the summer which has already past.

In the second stanza, an imaginative element enters the description, and we get a personification of the season in several appropriate postures and settings.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers;
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

As this stanza proceeds, the implications of the descriptive details become increasingly strong. For example, autumn is now seen, not as setting the flowers to budding, but as already bringing some of them to an end, although it 'Spares the next swath'. Autumn has become a 'gleaner'. The whole stanza presents the paradoxical qualities of autumn, its aspects both of lingering and passing. This is specially true of the final image. Autumn is the season of dying as well as of fulfilling. Hence it is with 'patient look' that she (or he?) watches the last oozings hours by hours.

or a steady dripping, is, of course, not unfamiliar as a symbol of the passage of time.

It is in the last stanza that the theme emerges most conspicuously.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
 Think not of them, thou hast thy music too, —
 While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
 And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
 Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
 Among the river sallows, borne aloft
 Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
 And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
 Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
 The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
 And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

The opening question implies that the season of youth and rebirth, with its beauties of sight and sound, has passed, and that the season of autumn is passing. But autumn, too, *while* it lasts — 'While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day' — has its beauties, its music, as Keats' poem demonstrates. The imagery of the last stanza contrasts significantly with that of the first, and the final development of the poem adds meaning to its earlier portions. The slight implications are confirmed. We may recall that 'maturing' means aging and ending as well as ripening. The earlier imagery is, of course, that of ripeness. But the final imagery is more truly autumnal. The first words used to describe the music of autumn are 'wailful' and 'mourn'. The opening stanza suggests the height of day, when the sun is strong and the bees are gathering honey from the open flowers. But in the last stanza, after the passing of 'hours and hours', we have 'the soft-dying day', the imagery of sunset and deepening twilight, when the clouds impart their glow to the day and the plains. The transitive, somewhat rare use of the verb *bloom*, with its springlike associations, is perhaps surprising, and certainly

appropriate and effective in suggesting the tensions of the theme, in picturing a beauty that is lingering, but *only* lingering. The conjunction of 'rosy hue' and 'stubble-plains' has the same significant incongruity, although the image is wholly convincing and actual in its reference. While the poem is more descriptive and suggestive than dramatic, its latent theme of transitoriness and mortality is symbolically dramatized by the passing course of the day. All these characteristics of the poem are to be found in its final image: 'And gathering swallows twitter in the skies'. Here we have the music of autumn. And our attention is directed toward the darkening skies. Birds habitually gather in flocks toward nightfall, particularly when they are preparing to fly south at the approach of winter. But they are still gathering. The day, the season, are 'soft-dying' and are both the reality and the symbol of life as most intensely and poignantly beautiful when viewed from this melancholy perspective.

This reading of 'To Autumn' is obviously slanted in the direction of a theme which is also found in the other odes. The theme is, of course, only a part of the poem, a kind of dimension, or extension, which is almost concealed by other features of the poem, particularly by the wealth of concrete descriptive detail. Whereas in 'Ode on Melancholy' the theme, in one of its aspects, is the immediate subject, in 'To Autumn' the season is the subject and the details which describe and thus present the subject are also the medium by which the theme is explored. It may be of interest, at this point, to distinguish between exploration and illustration. For example, Herrick's 'To Daffodils' has a theme which is at least superficially similar to Keats'. But in Herrick's poem the theme is openly stated, and it is, in fact, the subject, which is illustrated by logical analogy with the daffodils. In 'To Autumn', however, the relationship between subject and theme is not one of analogy. The theme inheres in the subject, and is at no point stated in other terms. That is

why we could say, in our reading of the poem, that the subject 'is both the reality and the symbol', and to say now that the development of the subject is, in a respect, the exploration of a theme.

The poem has an obvious structure in so far as it is a coherent description. Its structure, however, is not simple in the sense of being merely continuous. For example, the course of the day parallels the development of the poem. And an awareness of the theme gives even greater significance to the structure, for the theme emerges with increasing clarity and fullness throughout the poem until the very last line. Because the theme is always in the process of emerging without ever shaking off the medium in which it is developed, the several parts of the poem have a relationship to each other beyond their progression in a single direction. The gathering swallows return some borrowed meaning to the soft-dying day with substantial interest, and the whole last stanza negotiates with the first in a similar relationship. (If we had a special word for this kind of structure in poetry, we should be less inclined to discuss it figuratively. The words *organic* and *dynamic* have been used, as well as the word *dramatic*. Particularly in regard to Keats' poetry has *spatial* been used as a critical term [by Tate]. For example, we might say that the structure of 'To Autumn' is *spatial*, not only because of the quality of the imagery, but because the structural elements exist, or coexist, in a relationship with each other which is different from the temporal progression that constitutes, on one level, all descriptive, narrative, and discursive writing. This *spatial* metaphor is applicable in more or less degree to any piece of writing in so far as it fulfills the formal conditions of art. It is by such considerations that we move in an ever widening circle away from the particular poem or experience, and the expressions which were initially metaphors thus tend to become abstract critical terms. 'To Autumn' itself, as we have seen, has implications about space and time, but because it scarcely takes

the first step into metaphor, which is also a step toward statement, it is of all the odes at the farthest extreme from abstraction.)

We have observed the descriptive, temporal (course of day), and thematic aspects of the structure. Another aspect of structure appears when, once more, we consider the poem within the context of Keats' work. 'To Autumn' shares a feature of development with the odes on the Nightingale and the Grecian Urn. Each of these poems begins with presentation of realistic circumstances, then moves into an imagined realm, and ends with a return to the realistic. In 'Ode to a Nightingale', the most clearly dramatic of the poems, the speaker, hearing the song of the nightingale, wishes to fade with it 'into the forest dim' and to forget the painful realities of life. This wish is fulfilled in the fourth stanza - the speaker exclaims, 'Already with thee!' As the poem proceeds and while the imagined realm is maintained, the unpleasant realities come back into view. From the transition that begins with the desire for 'easeful Death' and through the references to 'hungry generations' and 'the sad heart of Ruth', the imagined and the real, the beautiful and the melancholy, are held balanced against each other. Then, on the word 'forlorn', the speaker turns away from the imagined, back to the real and his 'sole self'.

'Ode on a Grecian Urn' opens with an apostrophe to the actual urn. In the second stanza the imagined realm, the 'ditties of no tone', is invoked, and the 'leaf-fringed legend' comes to life. And here, too, the imagined life and real life are set in contrast against each other - the imagined is the negation of the real. It is in the fourth stanza that the imagined life is most fully developed and at the same time collapses into the real. The urn is left behind and the people are considered as not only in the scenes depicted on the urn, but as having left some little town. With the image of the town, desolate and silent, the imagination has completed its course. The people can never return

to the town. In the final stanza they are again 'marble men and maidens' and the urn is a 'Cold Pastoral'. The statement about truth and beauty with which the poem ends is famous and much debated. It is conceivable that Keats is saying here what he has said elsewhere and in another way - in the *Ode* that begins

Bards of Passion and of Mirth,
Ye have left your souls on earth!
Have ye souls in heaven too,
Double-lived in regions new?

Toward the end of the poem there are these lines:

Here, your earth-born souls still speak
To mortals, of their little week;
Of their sorrows and delights;
Of their passions and their spites;
Of their glory and their shame;
What doth strengthen and what maim.
Thus ye teach us, every day
Wisdom, though fled far away.

Keats is not didactic here, nor does he claim didacticism for the bards. Their earth-born souls, their works, teach wisdom in speaking of the lives of men, and in bringing to men, generation after generation, an intensified awareness and thrill of being alive. It is the same wisdom which the urn will continue to teach 'in midst of other woe'. Keats believed that man's life, though rounded by a little sleep, is the stuff of which 'a thing of beauty' is made. Art takes its truth from life, and then returns it to life as beauty. The paradox that 'teases us out of thought' is that in a work of art there is a kind of life which is both dead and immortal. But, a melancholy truth, *only* the dead are immortal. If there is a heaven, Keats wanted it to be very much like earth, with a Mermaid Tavern where poets could browse 'with contented

smack'. Delight is inseparable from melancholy because it is not conceivable apart from the mortal predicament. The answer to the question at the end of 'Ode to a Nightingale' - 'Do I wake or sleep?' - is, Both. In the structural imaginative arc of the poem, the speaker is returned to the 'drowsy numbness' wherein he is awake to his own mortal lot and no longer awake to the vision of beauty. Yet he knows that it is the same human melancholy which is in the beauty of the bird's 'plaintive anthem' and in the truth of his renewed depression. His way of stating this knowledge is to ask the question. Such considerations may clarify the truth-beauty passage. Whether they justify artistically Keats' use of these clichés of Platonic speculation is another matter. Keats was no Platonist, and if he had avoided those terms or if he had indicated more obviously, within the poem, that he was using the word *truth* in a sense close to the materialism of his own times, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' would have had a different career in the history of literary criticism. It is unlikely that any amount of exegesis can rescue those last lines of the poem from associations with Platonic pietism, for Keats was not enough of a witty and conscious ironist to exploit successfully the philosophical ambiguities of *truth*. His romanticism was neither reactionary nor modernist in that way, and he may not even have been clearly aware of the ambiguity involved. If it could be proved that he was innocent of the ambiguity, and wanted only the philosophical prestige of the Platonic associations, then from his point of view the poem would not suffer from the difficulties which the merest sophistication can ascribe to it. Whether such ignorance of the law would be too outrageous to merit critical exoneration is a nice problem for critical theory.

In considering the arc of imagination as an aspect of structure, we have noticed that 'Ode to a Nightingale' approaches general statement and that 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' arrives at it. 'To Autumn' is

obviously less explicit, although it shows the same structural aspect. The lush and realistic description of the first stanza is followed by the imagined picture of autumn as a person who, while a lovely part of a lively scene, is also intent upon destroying it. The personification is dropped in the final stanza, and there is again a realistic description, still beautiful but no longer lush, and suggesting an approaching bleakness.

The imaginative aspect of structure which the three odes have in common illustrates opinions which are in accord with the thought of Keats' times and which he occasionally expressed in his poetry. The romantic poets' preoccupation with nature is proverbial, and there are a number of studies (e.g., Caldwell's on Keats) relating their work and thought to the associationist psychology which was current in their times. According to this psychology, all complex ideas and all products of the imagination were, by the association of remembered sensations, evolved from sensory experiences. Keats found this doctrine interesting and important not because it led back to the mechanical functioning of the brain and the nervous system, but because sensations led to the imagination and finally to myth and poetry, and because the beauty of nature was thus allied with the beauty of art. In the early poem which begins, 'I stood tip-toe upon a little hill', Keats suggests that the legends of classical mythology were created by poets responding to the beauties of nature:

For what has made the sage or poet write
But the fair paradise of Nature's light?
In the calm grandeur of a sober line,
We see the waving of the mountain pine;
And when a tale is beautifully staid,
We feel the safety of a hawthorn glade:

While at our feet, the voice of crystal bubbles
Charms us at once away from all our troubles:

So that we feel uplifted from the world,
Walking upon the white clouds wreath'd and curl'd,
So felt he, who first told, how Psyche went
On the smooth wind to realms of wonderment.

What first inspired a bard of old to sing
Narcissus pining o'er the untainted spring?
In some delicious ramble, he had found
A little space, with boughs all woven round;
And in the midst of all, a clearer pool . . .

In the *Ode to Psyche*, which was written during the same year as the other odes (1819),¹ Keats claims a similar experience for himself and contrasts it with those of the 'bards of old'. He has come upon Cupid and Psyche while he 'wandered in a forest thoughtlessly'. Although the times are 'too late for antique vows' and the 'fond believing lyre', he is still by his 'own eyes inspired'. If he cannot celebrate this symbolic deity with rites and shrine, then he proposes to do so with the service of the imagination, with 'the wreath'd trellis of a working brain, . . . all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign' and with all that 'shadowy thought can win'. Conspicuous throughout Keats' work, blended and adjusted according to his own temperament and for his own purposes, are these *données* of his time: a theory of the imagination, the Romantic preoccupation with nature, and the refreshed literary tradition of classical mythology. These are reflected by the structure of his most successful poems, and are an element in their interrelatedness.

'To Autumn' is shorter than the other odes, and simpler on the surface in several respects. The nightingale sings of summer 'in full-throated ease', and the boughs in the flowery tale on the urn cannot shed their leaves 'nor ever bid the Spring adieu'. The world in which the longer odes have their setting is either young or in its prime, spring or summer. Consequently, in these poems some directness of statement and a greater complexity are necessary in order to

develop the paradoxical theme, in order to penetrate deeply enough the temple of Delight and arrive at the sovran shrine of Melancholy. The urn's 'happy melodist' plays a song of spring, and the 'self-same song' of the nightingale is of summer. One of these songs has 'no tone', and the other is in either 'a vision or a waking dream', for the voice of the 'immortal Bird' is finally symbolized beyond the 'sensual ear'. But the music of autumn, the twittering of the swallows, remain realistic and literal, because the tensions of Keats's theme are implicit in the actual conditions of autumn, when beauty and melancholy are merging on the very surface of reality. Keats's genius was away from statement and toward description, and in autumn he had the natural symbol for his meanings. If 'To Autumn' is shorter than the other odes and less complex in its materials, it has the peculiar distinction of great compression achieved in simple terms.

SOURCE: *The Man in the Name: Essays on the Experience of Poetry*, Minneapolis, 1956.

NOTE

1. The *Psyche*, *Melancholy*, *Nightingale*, and *Grecian Urn* odes were written in May, and 'To Autumn' in September.