

## To Autumn

'To Autumn' may be the last poem Keats wrote for his last lifetime volume. It is about ending, but no dark finale. It pauses on a rich interval between seasons, undeluded about mortality, yet suspending its weight, for this day. 'How beautiful the season is now', he wrote to a friend from Winchester, 21 September 1819. 'How fine the air. A Temperate sharpness about it... I never lik'd stubble fields so much as now – Aye better than the chilly green of the Spring. Somehow a stubble plain looks warm... this struck me so much in my Sunday's walk that I composed upon it.'<sup>1</sup> While 'stubble plain' is the mark of harvest's end, the sensation of sunlit warmth was Keats's Sunday inspiration, still with the feel of summer, unlike winter-cold spring. Although some readers are eager to indict the Ode's mythic turn of meditation amid a season in 1819 of political crisis, this is deeply unfair, and inattentive. Keats was not existentially tuned out. He needed a day off from his life-distresses, from following the daily news of the massacre at Manchester and the aftermath of prosecution. He was reading the newspapers every day, and just for this 'soft-dying day' wanted to immerse himself in a mood that feels like for ever, but which he knew was timebound, deathbound. He was still healthy and not yet twenty-four, but with a shadow of mortality in his everyday consciousness.

In aesthetic tradition, Autumn is a double season, of harvest for the winter and death in nature. Keats knows this score and he plays with it. 'To Autumn' is an ode of time-halted (but not, crucially, time-stopped) imagination. There is a wry joke in his half-dozen linked infinitive verbs (to load and bless, to bend and fill, to swell and plump) that thread the first stanza, taking the grammar called 'infinitive' (not temporally defined) into sensation of 'never cease', this plumped by present participles (*-ing*) that sing along, and conjunctions that accumulate in temporal equilibrium ('and' five times). The phonic score becomes hyper-harmonic in the last line's triple *mm*: *Summer–brimm'd–clammy*. This last adjective, 'clammy', is for 'cells', a sound tuned all the way from line 1: *mellow–fruitful–fill–swell–hazel shells–kernel still more–flowers*. Even 'bend and fill' plays against the expectation of 'fall' in this season. Stuart Sperry nicely remarks that 'adieu', 'the theatrical, slightly affected word that occurs in each of the odes of the spring,' is absent here, though this is where you might expect it.<sup>2</sup> Such is subtle perfection of Keats's double-plays, evoking but not distilling.

These doubleplays against expectation stay mindful about what is being evoked but not played out. Readers of Keats know, for instance, other situations of 'mists', most famous in his trope of life in the world as a series of dark passages, where 'we are in a Mist ... We feel "the burden of the Mystery"'<sup>3</sup> to lines he took care to underline near the end of *Paradise Lost*, in Milton's simile for how the angels 'descended' to evict Adam and Eve,

Gliding meteorous, as evening mist  
Risen from the river o'er the marish glides,  
And gathers ground fast at the labourer's heel  
Homeward returning. (12.629-632)

Milton's edge is to situate 'as' for both visual analogy and the coming temporality of postlapsarian labor. The 'mists' of 'To Autumn' knowingly deflect these assignments, as well as any sinister sense in 'Conspiring'. Keats draws its etymology 'breathing with' into a cooperative nurture of climate and sun, and into a doubled 'maturing' for this sun: over the course of the year, and as ripening. His final touch is a funny diminuendo about bee-mindedness. The season's languor sets 'still more, later flowers for the bees, / Until they think warm days will never cease.' Bees don't *think*; this is wryly indulged human-fantasy with an echo of 'cease' (from the 'Season' that seems to be doing no such thing).

Stanza 1 halts its still incomplete grammar (all vocative) at a period, a mark that seems merely notional on the momentum of syntax into stanza 2: ‘Who hath not seen thee...?’ No real question, but a rhetorical cue for four personified labors, in silence and slow time: winnowing, reaping, gleaning, cyder-pressing. ‘Sometimes’ / ‘sometimes’ are not time-words but spatialized positioners of time nearly suspended. How deft is Keats’s mimetic holding ‘find’ at the end of a line (‘...may find / Thee sitting’), for a pause. And ‘find’ what? Nothing more than iconic Autumn ‘sitting careless’ in an onomatopoetic ‘winnowing wind’. This is visual imagination and a soundscape: Autumn ‘on a half-reap’d furrow sound asleep, / Drows’d with the fume of poppies’ echoes ‘reap’d’ in ‘asleep’, scored with the flow of sound and furrow into ‘Drows’d’. Those ‘last ooziings, hours by hours’, sound-spun from ‘drows’d’, linger in slowest time over cyder-pressing, even gathering up the insistent later flowers of stanza 1. In the very sound, ‘hours by hours’ verges on infinite prolongation.

But ‘hour’ is temporal after all. All these luxuries are edged with such reminders: ‘store’ tells of storing for winter, ‘careless’ notes necessary ‘care’; ‘half-reap’d’ and the ‘next swath’ are rests, not arrests; ‘like a gleaner’ evokes the late season of stubble plains; and the stanza 2’s last line does say of the cyder-pressing, ‘last’. Amid these prolonged but not infinite luxuries, Stanza 3 plays its first line ‘Where are the songs of Spring?’ against the elegiac *ubi sunt* of elegiac tradition. Keats rebukes the sigh in the same line, nearly the same breath, by impatient repetition, and then a retuning: ‘Ay, where are they? / Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—’. The spondee ‘Think not’, replacing a long distanced spring – ‘they’ with an Autumn - present ‘thy’, cues a ‘Song of Autumn’: the ode’s auto-mimesis. Keats sounds the notes from sky to plains to river to hilly bourn; its chorus joins lambs, gnats, crickets, redbreast, and swallows: ‘wail’, ‘mourn’, ‘bleat’, ‘sing’, ‘whistle’, ‘twitter’. By the time this chorus gets to ‘whistle with treble soft’, the poetry of ‘To Autumn’ itself has joined it, the onomatopoeia of ‘whistle’ spreading its sounds and letterings to ‘with *treble soft*.’

Keats’s music is more subtle yet in the way it plays spring tones without *ubi sunt*. For the phrase ‘barred clouds bloom’ the soft dying day, it is no wonder that OED gives ‘To Autumn’ unique citation for this verb-use of ‘bloom’, imaging clouds as flowers, misting the stubble-plains of harvest’s end with a ‘rosy hue’. More ‘spring’ sounds in the way ‘small gnats mourn’ sounds ‘morn’, and ‘borne’ tunes to ‘born’ (springtime’s lambs). And a suspended temporality altogether hovers in the double-*or* sounds of ‘borne aloft / Or sinking’ (sounded first in *borne*) and the *or* of ‘lives or dies’. These are variations in the moment rather than path-markers from life to death. Even the conjunctions—‘while’, ‘then’, ‘now’—are spatial equivalences, as prepositional as the place-markers, ‘from’, ‘among’, ‘from’. Keats keeps his verbs in this double chord: the participle adjective, ‘gathering’, draws on both ‘soft-dying’ and ‘sing’. His hard knowledge is that swallows are ‘in the skies,’ because unlike bees, they instinctively know that warm days will cease and they must act accordingly. Keats’s sightline on this last song is utterly human.

Susan Wolfson  
Princeton University  
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<sup>1</sup> Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds 21 September 1819. *Letters* ii, 167

<sup>2</sup> Stuart M. Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton NJ, 1973), 284

<sup>3</sup> Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds 3 May 1818. *Letters* i, 218