

Keats: A Critical Survey of 'To Autumn' and 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'

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It seems generally agreed that 'To Autumn' is a rich and vivid description of nature, expertly achieved with a fairly intricate stanzaic pattern. The words are successfully descriptive or evocative in their phonetic qualities and rhythmical arrangement, as well as in their imagistic references. The poem is not only rich in pictorial and sensuous details, but 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. 'To Autumn' 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;
... with a sweet kernel; to set budding more.
And still more, later flowers for the bees....

The details about the fruit, the flowers, and the bees constitute a lush and colourful 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 passed.

In the second stanza, an imaginative element enters the description and we find 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....

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 watches the last oozing hours by hours. Oozing 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 shallows, borne aloft

...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 "maturity" means aging and ending as well as ripening. The earlier 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 the 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 spring like 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. In this ode 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 ode, 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. This ode itself, as the readers could feel, 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.

It is a commonplace of Keats's criticism to present the poet as struggling against both a debilitating sense of his own immaturity and the wider public perception of him as 'immature'. For Levinson, Keats' 'To Autumn' is "probably the only one of Keats's poems- where the self-consciousness- the class and the personality line gets overwritten". Helen Vendler finds 'repeated mitigations, easing and softenings' that allow us to apprehend Keats' 'less combative attitude', while Michael O'Neill asserts that the ode is empty of 'gestures of protest' and 'assertions of self'. We can detect a clear desire to redeem a poem that is possibly Keats' most powerfully and self possessedly canonical from the unrest discernible elsewhere in his oeuvre, unrest deriving from tensions generated by an equivocal stance towards maturity. Readers have traditionally been reluctant to permit these tensions to problematize 'To Autumn'. According to Leonard Unger '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 book *John Keats' Fancy*.

Allen Tate, in an essay primarily concerned with the nightingale Ode, writes of 'To Autumn' that it "is a very neatly perfect piece of style but it has little to say". This is true enough in a sense, but this is not true enough 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 extravagant, 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’.

The powerful logic of maturity that is understood to reside in the poem is either discovered within its thematic structure and narrative (Walter Jackson Bate suggests that the ode aspires to ‘resolution’. Andrew Motion argues that any equivocation in the poem is curtailed, finally, in the fact that ‘autumn is about to turn into winter’); or it is identified in the artistic processes of growth and development assumed to have produced the poem. New historical readings too, seemingly unconcerned with allegories of human growth and dissipation, appear loathe to dispense with maturity as a measuring stick of the poem’s accomplishment. Nicholas Roe’s analysis of the *Ode in John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (1997) could be said to have swapped artistic maturity for political maturity. In Roe’s critique ‘To Autumn’ is read as codifying a ‘grown up’, covert awareness of potential insurrection where contestation is lodged in semantic grouping like “close bosom friend” and “clammy cells”, phrases supposedly redolent of intrigue and its bed fellow- ‘barred’ incarceration. A critic for the *Monthly Review* sensed that the volume in which ‘To Autumn’ first appeared, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems (1820)* was involved in ambiguity. According to Geoffrey Hartman, ‘To Autumn’ is engaged with profound crisis of consciousness and personality. The outwardly calm landscape of To Autumn is a field of struggle on which Keats asserts the legitimacy of ‘juvenile industry’ and ‘boyish subjectivity’ against his critics’ adult reprimands. It is, as a poem of harvesting, represents Keats’ most fully worked nexus of such homologies: among other things the poem is an articulation of the politics and economics both of agriculture and of writing.

F.R Leavis, Kenneth Burke, Cleanth Brooks and Allen Tate have all made appraisals and interpretations of Keats’ odes. ‘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. ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ expresses Keats’ adherence to art and architectural objects. It is one of the five odes Keats composed in the summer and autumn of 1819. This Ode was first published in a journal called *Annals of the Fine Arts*. The Ode focuses the stillness and silence of classical sculpture. Through this Ode Keats tries to explore the relationship between imagined beauty and the harsh reality of everyday human experience.

‘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 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 but 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.

The way Keats has described the Urn as a piece of art indicates that art and artistic objects gain a durability and permanence from their subject matter although without any human effort such inevitability of its beauty cannot be produced. No specific urn is described by the poet, he is sharing his first hand experience of viewing an urn and describing its aesthetic value. He praises the urn as "a foster child of silence and slow time", a Sylvan Historian whose pictorial creations are sweeter than words:

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:

Keats feels quite restless to find answers to a few questions among which the most important was what are the legends and passions the urn narrates? The utilitarian value of the urn lies in its capability to hold human ashes and that reveals probably the most significant truth- the impermanence of human life. Who are the human beings whose ashes are preserved in the urn? He imagines that either it can be a lover with a maiden in a grove

of trees and a piper, another shows a crowd on its way to a ritual sacrifice and a 'mysterious priest' leading a heifer to an altar. Whoever it is, the ultimate truth lies in

All breathing human passion far above

That leaves a heart high sorrowful and cloy'd,

A Burning forehead and a parching tongue.

Perhaps alluding to his brother Tom, the opposition between the cool urn and the scorching physicality of "burning forehead" and "parching tongue" evokes the intense stillness and suffering within humanity. The poet's sense of desolation is revealed in the following manner

And, little town, thy streets for evermore

Will silent be: and not a soul to tell

What thou art desolate, can e'er return.

The ending is ambiguous but there is reason in its ambiguity. It pervades the whole poem and like Keats' other odes it is a poem notable not for the answers which it may or may not present but for the skill and intensity with which it asks the questions.

References

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