The Ode "To Autumn"

By B. C. Southam

I

It is not surprising that the ode "To Autumn" has figured only slightly in the criticism of Keats's mature poetry, for in comparison with the other odes of 1819 "To Autumn" does not seem to offer fertile ground for the purposes of discussion or exposition.[1] To all levels of readers it is an immediately attractive poem within which we find an acute and vivid description of the season, its processes and phenomena rendered sensitively in the verbal texture and the movement of the lines. There are no critical or textual cruces, no historical or technical references needing explanation. Here we have, if anywhere, a great poem which may be received by the common reader without a heavy apparatus of footnotes or explication. Indeed, to comment upon its already eloquent qualities would be to do little more than exemplify Keats's particular genius in the presentation of sensuous experience. The ode can fittingly be described as a perfect work of art, flawless in detail, and composed in mood. It is a satisfying whole which presents, unlike the "Nightingale," not just a passage of experience, but an experience which is complete in itself. In passing such a judgment one is, of course, implying reservations as to its scope. A short poem can present completely only a certain, limited, experience, and Dr. Leavis was quite right to rap Middleton Murry sharply over the knuckles for suggesting that Keats's ode embodies the truth that "Ripeness is all." "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," writes Dr. Leavis in *Revaluation*.[2] Certainly, "To Autumn" has not the profound order of significance commanded by *King Lear,* but it must be said that the exercise of Keats's genius in the ode is conducted at a higher level than Dr. Leavis' remarks

1. In January 1959, some months after this essay was written, was published *John Keats, A Reassessment,* essays on Keats edited by Kenneth Muir. Arnold Davenport contributes "A Note on 'To Autumn,'" which argues for a more searching reading of the ode.

2. (London, 1953), p. 263.

would suggest, and lies in a direction to which his criticism does not point. If Middleton Murry errs, at least he errs in the right direction, for while sufficient attention has already been paid to the surface of the poem (in respect of its diction, rhythm, metrical structure, and so forth), inadequate regard has been given to the ideas which are communicated through the descriptive material. The poem stands, then, not so much in need of technical analysis as interpretation. That it has not been examined closely in this way is due largely, I believe, to its flawless surface, and its apparently transparent meaning. Further, these two observations, the conventional appraisals, handed down from critic to critic, have never been checked, even by Dr. Leavis, who is independent and fair in every other comment he has to make on Keats.

For sixty years the tenor of criticism on the ode "To Autumn" has been dominated by Robert Bridges. Since his pronouncement in the "Critical Introduction to Keats," 1895, it can be seen that later criticism has consisted of little more than a reiteration of his two major points. Referring to seven of the odes that he had just mentioned Bridges continues: "if we rank them merely according to perfection of workmanship, the one that was last written, that is the *Ode To Autumn,* will claim the highest place; and unless it be objected as a slight blemish that the words 'Think not of them' in the second line of the third stanza are somewhat awkwardly addressed to a personification of Autumn, I do not know that any sort of fault can be found in it. But this ode does not in any part of it reach the marvellous heights attained by several of the others in their best places, and even if judged as a whole it is left far behind by the splendor of the *Nightingale,* in which the mood is more intense, and the poetry vies in richness and variety with its subject."[3] "To Autumn" is here treated as a more elegant, but less interesting elder brother to the "Nightingale." And the reputation of the later ode has never recovered from this damning praise. From Bridges, 1895, we turn to Allen Tate, 1945, in "A Reading of Keats."[4] Fifty years have passed, but the assessment is identical. Tate invokes Bridges' name, and goes on to write: " 'Ode to Autumn' is a very nearly perfect piece of style but it has little to say. Because I believe that 'Ode to a Nightingale' at least tries to say everything that poetry can say I am putting it at the center of this discussion."[5] Then follows an examination of that poem. Until Leonard Unger's essay "Keats and the Music of Autumn" in *The Man in the Name,*[6] the Bridges-Tate judgment of the poem had stood, unsubstantiated, and

3. Robert Bridges, "Critical Introduction" to *The Poetical Works of John Keats,* ed. Laurence Binyon (London, 1916), pp. xxxi-xxxii; reprinted in part in Keats, *Poetry & Prose,* ed. Henry Ellershaw (Oxford, 1930), see pp. 25-26.

4. In *The Man of Letters in the Modern World* (New York, 1955), pp. 193-210.

5. The same, pp. 195-196.

6. (Minneapolis, 1956).

unquestioned. Unger was the first to point out that "To Autumn" has, in the matter of critical attention, been unworthily treated, and it is disturbing to record that the recent large-scale studies, *The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems,* by E. R. Wasserman, 1953, and *On the Poetry of Keats,* by E. C. Pettet, 1957, mention the ode only incidentally, while examining other of the poems in close detail. Because I believe (to use Tate's word) the ode "says" a very great deal, I am ready to offer an interpretation of "To Autumn" in order to underline significances in the poem which seem to have been missed or ignored. In the process of offering this interpretation I hope to go some of the way toward applying the criterion of Coleridge's famous dictum in the *Biographia,* Chapter 14: "nothing can permanently please which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so, and not otherwise."[7]

II

The three stanzas of "To Autumn" trace the progress of the season. Stanza one characterizes Autumn in her activity as bringer of the season's fruits. Stanza two narrows the focus of description onto Autumn as a figure resting from the harvest toil. Stanza three watches the end of the season as it is seen in the countryside declining and merging into earliest winter. The process of seasonal change through these three stages is rendered with a movement so delicate that it is almost imperceptible. The aspects of autumn presented in stanzas one and three —richness and fruitfulness, as against the austerity of the harvested countryside—provide the dominant contrast, with the repose of stanza two assisting the easy and gradual transition from the season's height to its close. Yet these contrary aspects of the season are not isolated in the first and third stanzes, for in the opening line we are confronted with a paradigm of the season's moods, beginning, strikingly, with a reminder of the last days of autumn. It is first hailed as the "Season of mists." This is a spectral, disembodied, chill feature of the season's end, which would be equally well accommodated in the closing lines of the poem, where the suggestive qualities of the thin "i" sounds are exploited to the full. Next, we read that it is a season of "mellow fruitfulness." "Mellow," a broader sound, suggests the development achieved in stanza two, while "fruitfulness" glances at Autumn in her first capacity, fecund and beneficent. The three aspects of the season stand in close proximity at the head of the poem, the contrary tensions of the first and last dissolving almost before we are aware of their presence. It is as if we are placed within the mind of the poet, where,

7. *Biographia Literaria,* ed. J. C. Metcalf (New York, 1926), p. 195.

even with such speed, this opposition was resolved at the very moment of formulation.

Having opened with what is at once a reminder and a reconciliation of autumn's passage from glory into decay, stanza one proceeds with an account of the season's glory, its "fruitfulness." Autumn is established as a primal, creative force, working with the sun to bring to fruition the year's harvest. She is the maturing sun's "Close bosom-friend . . . Conspiring with him how to load and bless." The physical intimacy of the first phrase, the hint of secrecy and purpose in the word "Conspiring," and the intention "to load and bless," all these details suggest a union of male sun and female autumn which is both fertile and holy, and which to the poet is awe-inspiring in its mysteries. The beauty and wonder of natural growth, which the remainder of the stanza is concerned with, are thus dignified and placed within the terms of a superhuman ordinance. Only in lines 11 and 12 are we allowed to forget that autumn is the driving force behind this last stage of development. The seven infinitive verbs, from lines 3 to 9, are all dependent on the present participle "Conspiring." The processes these words denote are not permitted to seem autonomous or automatic, for behind them is their director and source of energy. However, six of these verbs are monosyllabic, and each of them stands at the head of a successive statement, heavily stressed and in a prominent position. So, although the activity of growth is subordinate to the controlling autumnal presence, it is nevertheless presented firmly and palpably, and as we move through the series, "load, bless, bend, swell, plump," we find the sensuous reality which makes this enacting, rather than descriptive, poetry. Not until the last four lines is there any suggestion of the passage of time. Up to this point we have a scene whose details are in motion, but which as a whole is static in the temporal mode, which is pictorial in effect, not dramatic. Once Keats has delivered to us "solidity of specification" in the terms of detail he is then ready to place the whole in the context of time, and with the repetition "more, And still more," and the word "later," a sense of duration is born. This is strengthened in the final two lines, where the perspective extends forward, as the bees "think warm days will never cease," and backwards, into "Summer." This last section of stanza one places autumn in the cycle of the seasons, and initiates the temporal movement which was before withheld in favor of emphasizing the prime aspect of early autumn, that of full and final growth.

Stanza two continues the development of the season. Growth and enrichment are to run their natural course, and we have reached the stage of harvesting. No longer is Autumn characterized by her dynamic, energizing powers. The rhetorical question which opens the second

stanza suddenly brings Autumn very much closer to the reader, for reader, poet, and season are together involved in the simple, welcoming statement. There is a new easiness of tone, after the rather formal apostrophe, to Autumn the deity or primal force, which opened the first stanza. And this sense of relaxation is not only in the obvious physical repose of Autumn "sitting," "sound asleep," and "drows'd," but also in the casual generality of expression:

> *Sometimes whoever* seeks abroad *may* find
> Thee sitting *careless* . . .
> And *sometimes* like a gleaner.

Autumn is now resting after the period of creative activity, and of the four vignettes which place her as a figure in a harvest scene, three catch her in a moment of repose. The personification is delicate, almost incidental, for the physical details are integrated with the particular scene in which the personal manifestation of Autumn is located: she is "sitting on a granary floor," her hair caught in the breeze of the "winnowing wind"; as a gleaner she steadies her "head" beneath its burden; and elsewhere we receive an impression of her existence in a bodily form only as she is lying asleep in the fields or resting as she watches the cider-press. Thus our attention is not upon her physical presence, but on her participation in certain scenes, and a balance is maintained between the figure and its context. As in the previous stanza, the scene changes, while time stands still; the forward impetus is generated towards the stanza's close, where Keats addresses Autumn, "Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours." In the phrase "last oozings," "last" glances forward to the final stanza, while "oozings" is an echo of the richness of stanza one, and these hints of time past and time future are given a wonderful sense of duration by the dragging length of "hours by hours."

Superficially the stanza conveys an impression of fitting ease and relaxation, yet beneath this placid, contented surface is a counter-movement of tension. In stanza one Autumn had prospered the harvest. She was the beneficent deity of the countryside, maternal in her creative force. In stanza two the fruits of the year are to be gathered in. Autumn changes her aspect, to become the reaper with the hook, the gleaner bearing away the last of the grain, the attendant of the cider-press watching, as it were, the very essence of the season extracted to the last drop; or is to be found in the granary, which is no mere storehouse for the harvest, but the place where the flailed grain is released from its husk by the "winnowing wind." To man, these are the events of the season, and take their place in the natural cycle of the year. The earth must render its fruits, and the gentle movement of the stanza

confirms that the order of nature is here fulfilled. But simultaneously Keats makes us aware of a second, and opposing, undercurrent of feeling. Beauty, the fullness of life, the achievement of spring and summer, is being removed from its birth-place, the land, to be turned to man's use. It is the paradox of time; as it gives life, so must it take away. For a moment Autumn the reaper is close to Time with his scythe, moving across the harvest scene determined and inexorable. The harvest is reluctant at being reaped or gathered, and tries, with brief success, to foil Autumn at her menacing task. The poppies who next would have fallen victim to her hook have drowsed Autumn, in the act of reaping, into a deep sleep. The "hook" itself has entered into the conspiracy to halt Autumn—it "spares"; Autumn does not. The flowers in the swath about to be cut are "twined." They have grown intimately amongst the corn to become an emblem of love or happiness which the reaper will destroy. But at least their interlocking can be a heroic gesture, another hindrance to the reaper's progress. All is in vain, however. Autumn is next seen as the gleaner. The grain is cut, despite the reluctance of the flowers, the assistance of the poppies, and the mercy of the hook. The gleanings of the stubble-field are borne away. The brook, a dormant obstacle, cannot halt Autumn; "keep steady" implies determination, as well as physical stability, a determination which is present to the stanza's end, where Autumn watches "patiently" beside the press as the apples slowly surrender the last of their juice.

In the third stanza time is presented as the controlling force in autumn's last phase, remembering that by contrast, in stanza one, until its presence was more explicitly indicated in lines 9 and 10, time had remained a gentle, almost unperceived seasonal movement, implicit in the activity of the verbs of growth. Stanza two saw the entry of a new and ominous note—time the enemy—as an undercurrent to the scenes of harvesting and repose. Time, in the third stanza, is treated emphatically, and with overt reference to death, with such phrases as "the soft-dying day," "the small gnats mourn," "the light wind lives or dies," and the scene we move through is that of evening, on a day of late autumn, when all things seem to be approaching their end. This, surely enough, is the time and the hour for the "wailful choir." Even the visual beauties of the countryside are fleeting. The clouds, caught in the rays of the setting sun, warm the evening scene with a glowing red, casting across the harvested fields a reflected radiance. But this is a borrowed charm, a bloom on the face of "the soft-dying day," as external as the "rosy hue" which touches the "stubble-plains." The voluptuous warmth of color is a surface attraction which does not hide the sharp austerity, in sound and meaning, of these "stubble plains." The scene is beautiful, but heavy with pathos.

To anticipate, and meet these hints of sadness which accompany autumn's close, Keats makes a beautifully judged entry to the stanza. The first rhetorical question is spoken from the depths of the poet's reverie. For a brief instant he is seized with regret as his thoughts return to spring. He is weighing the seasons and their attractions against each other and, for an instant at least, considers the passage of the year to be a decline. Out of this consideration grows the second question, posed in the spirit of a gentle challenge, as if Keats is turning outwards and addressing his readers, and asserting to them that the loss of spring, with its songs, is irrevocable. With this repetition of the first question, the hint of regret, strong at the outset, is now slightly diminished as Keats relegates the songs of spring to their only proper place in time past. And this correction of feeling, away from the yearning of nostalgia which enervates, not inspires, is towards a positive and finer discrimination, the recognition of the very special beauties which are to be found at the end of the season. This discerning appreciation becomes more pronounced in the second line, which is trenchantly addressed to Autumn herself in reassurance that her close can match the very different songs of spring. Here is a gradual disengagement from the fullness of early teeming autumn and the relaxed physical ease of the after-harvest. Now autumn is celebrated with the least concrete of sense perceptions, that of hearing. The five sounds lead us away from the farm-scenes of the previous stanza, as we cross the harvested fields to the river bank, listen to the sheep on the hillside beyond, and then finally glance upwards into the skies where the swallows are gathering for their flight to warmer lands. Life, Keats tells us in this last detail, goes on elsewhere, and will return to the land which now seems bereft. It is a large and almost empty scene from which we are gently withdrawn as the visual details lead our attention out of the land and into the skies. The sense of perspective, or depth, is a remarkable achievement, which depends partly on the way in which our mind's eye moves across the expanse of the fields to the clouds on the horizon, and partly on the details of sound: the "loud bleat" of the sheep which carries across the countryside, and the "soft" note of the robin, near at hand. This spaciousness, and emptiness, is a distinct contrast to the close and physical proximity of growth and crowded richness which characterize the season's height. It is a leave-taking, free from nostalgia, which satisfies us as to the beauty of the season even now, in its decline and death, and which confirms the natural cycle of life, which is above regret, and which, as Keats would have us think, needs only to be recorded to be accepted.

As we have seen, a vivid apprehension of time lies at the heart of the ode. There is, of course, at one level, the simple temporal progres-

sion, which, like the dimension of space, must exist in the poem in order to enforce its imaginative reality. I have tried to show that Keats controls this element of sequential progression very strictly, keeping our attention fixed upon activities or scenes, while accelerating, or emphasizing, the temporal progression towards the end of the first two stanzas. Of a higher order than this is Keats's philosophical statement about time which he makes through the complex metaphor of autumn. Here, in this season, are reconciled, in the very moment they are communicated, the paradoxical aspects of time's relation to life: life can only commence and develop in time; in time must life end. We see in the opening line, and in stanza two, how the contrary aspects of the season, and the resistance of life to destruction, are at once acknowledged as external phenomena while in the same breath the tensions are dissolved. The mood of acceptance, the calmness with which Keats can face the fact that "Tempus edax rerum," is a maturity of attitude achieved *within* the poem, not an a priori assumption out of which it might have been conceived, as was, for example the sonnet of January, 1817, "After dark vapours have oppress'd our plains."[8] There is the verbal gesture, not the reality of experienced imaginative power which, in "To Autumn," gives us in stanza one the positives of abundance, energy, and natural bounty, to create in us a deep sense of loss when, at the close of the poem, we quit a wide, empty landscape. Our response is not "the pity of it," for Keats is master of our feelings, and his experience, of wise calm and acceptance, is made ours.

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8. *Keats' Poetical Works,* ed. H. W. Garrod, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1958), p. 458. It is there the third sonnet in the series, "Poems from 'Literary Remains' 1848."