

"Shut, shut those juggling⁸³ eyes, thou ruthless man!
Turn them aside, wretch! or the righteous ban⁸⁴
Of all the Gods, whose dreadful images
Here represent their shadowy presences,

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May pierce them on the sudden with the thorn
Of painful blindness; leaving thee forlorn,
In trembling dottage to the feeblest fright
Of conscience, for their long offended might,
For all thine impious proud-heart sophistries,
Unlawful magic, and enticing lies.

Corinthians! look upon that gray-beard wretch!
Mark how, possess'd, his lashless eyelids stretch
Around his demon eyes! Corinthians, see!
My sweet bride withers at their potency."

290

"Fool!" said the sophist, in an under-tone
Gruff with contempt; which a death-nighing⁸⁵ moan
From Lycius answer'd, as heart-struck and lost,
He sank supine beside the aching ghost.

"Fool! Fool!" repeated he, while his eyes still
Relented not, nor mov'd; "from every ill
Of life have I preserv'd thee to this day,
And shall I see thee made a serpent's prey?"

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Then Lamia breath'd death breath; the sophist's eye,
Like a sharp spear, went through her utterly,
Keen, cruel, perçant,⁸⁶ stinging: she, as well
As her weak hand could any meaning tell,
Morton'd him to be silent; vainly so,

He look'd and look'd again a level—No!
"A Serpent!" echoed he; no sooner said,
Than with a frightful scream she vanished:
And Lycius' arms were empty of delight,

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As were his limbs of life, from that same night.
On the high couch he lay!—his friends came round—
Supported him—no pulse, or breath they found,
And, in its marriage robe, the heavy body wound.

To Autumn

It is likely that this poem, the last of Keats's great lyrics, was composed on Sunday 19 September 1819 after the poet had returned from a country walk near Winchester in Hampshire. On the following Tuesday, he writes to J. H. Reynolds: 'How beautiful the season is now – How fine the air. A temperate sharpness about it. Really, without joking, chaste weather – Dian skies – 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 – in the same way that some pictures look warm – this struck me so much in my [S]unday's walk that I composed upon it.' 'To Autumn' is generally included in critical discussion of Keats's odes, though the poet did not explicitly label it as such. The poem simultaneously celebrates the fruitfulness of the season and offers an elegiac lament for the passing of spring and summer. Indeed, because of its status as Keats's final major lyric, it has also been read as a deeply poignant poem,¹ as if its eulogy of autumn, the season which heralds the 'cold threshold'² of winter, betokens an awareness, arguably even an acceptance, of physical decay and impending death.

Before the 1980s, most commentaries dwelt on the formal excellence of the poem: 'each generation,' declares Walter Jackson Bate, 'has found it one of the most nearly perfect poems in English'; '[F]or no other poem of the last two centuries does the classical critical vocabulary prove so satisfying'.³ For M. R. Ridley, 'To Autumn' is 'the most serenely flawless poem in our language'.⁴ Whilst for Stuart Sperry, the 'perfection of the ode' lies in its status as 'Keats's last and most mature comment on the poetic process'. To Sperry, the poem's description of autumn is actually a veiled, metaphorical meditation on creativity: 'its whole development from the imagery of ripening and storing in the first stanza, through that of winnowing and slow extraction in the second, to the subtle, thin, and tenuous music with which the poem rises to its close, represents his final adaptation of his favourite metaphor for poetic creation'.⁵ M. H. Abrams considered 'To Autumn' Keats's 'highest achievement' and argued that its power lies in attention to the subject of human mortality: 'The poem is about a season of the year, but [...] its ostensible subject [...] turns out to be the occasion for engaging with the multiple dilemmas of being human in the material world, in

1 See Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press (1st edn 1961), rev. edn 1971, pp. 434–5. See also M. H. Abrams's 'Keats's Poems: The Material Dimensions', in Robert Ryan and Ronald A. Sharp (eds), *The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats*, Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998. Arnold Davenport reads the poem as one of 'sorrow, loss and bereavement' ('A Note on *To Autumn*', in Kenneth Muir (ed.), *Keats: A Reassessment*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1958, pp. 96–102). Christopher Ricks writes of the 'poignancy [...] in the deep pain and deep serenity of "To Autumn"' (*Keats and Embarrassment*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 205).

2 The term is Geoffrey H. Hartman's.

3 Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1963.

4 M. R. Ridley, *Keats' Craftsmanship: A Study in Poetic Development*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933, p. 289.

5 Stuart M. Sperry, *Keats the Poet*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973, p. 337.

83 Spell-binding.
84 Edict.
85 Death-nighing.
86 Piercing.

which nothing can stay.⁶ For Abrams, "'To Autumn'" was the last work of artistic consequence that Keats completed [...] he achieved this celebratory poem, with its calm acquiescence to time, transience and mortality, at a time when he was possessed by a premonition, little short of conviction, that he had himself less than two years to live.⁷ Douglas Bush, on the other hand, reads the poem as manifesting Keatsian 'escapism' rather than 'acquiescence': 'To Autumn' is 'less a resolution of the perplexities of life and poetic ambition than an escape into the luxury of pure – though now sober – sensation.'⁸ Against readings such as those of Abrams and Bush, Ian Jack bluntly repudiates biographical interpretations which see the poem as a meditation on impending death: 'This is not a poem about Keats; it is a poem about autumn.'⁹ According to Jack, Keats 'regarded autumn as the season of harvest and achievement, disregarding its other role as the herald of winter and of death',¹⁰ and the 'remarkable success' of 'To Autumn' actually lies in the fact that 'the poet himself makes no appearance' in the poem: 'Like a painter he loses himself in the contemplation of what he is describing.'¹¹ Jack's sense that Keats erases himself completely from his poem is shared by Aileen Ward. For her, Keats is 'completely lost in his images, and the images are presented as meaning simply themselves: Keats's richest utterance is the barest of metaphor.'¹² Such a reading does not allow the possibility that 'To Autumn' might be read in terms of the historical and social context in which it appeared. Indeed, in his important, if difficult, essay 'Poem and Ideology: A Study of Keats's "To Autumn"', Geoffrey H. Hartman calls 'To Autumn' 'a poem without explicit social context' which manifests a 'true impersonality'. For Hartman, 'the poem starts on enchanted ground and never leaves it.'¹³

Jerome J. McGann, in his important and provocative New Historicist essay 'Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism' (1979), which is extracted on pp. 57–60, prompted a series of sociohistorical readings of 'To Autumn'. McGann agrees with Hartman that the poem seeks to avoid the political, exemplifying 'a charmed world far removed from [...] the dangerous political tensions of [Keats's] society'. However, McGann, unlike Hartman, faults

the poem for its inattention to, or attempted transcendence of, politics. In the month after the yeomanry had killed six people attending a radical meeting at St Peter's Fields, Manchester, in the 'Peterloo massacre', Keats ignores the political turmoil in English society and devotes himself to the idealised world of nature. The 'escapism' which Bush sees in Keats's poem is echoed here as a charge of political bad faith. Keats's 1820 volume, says McGann, is 'great' but 'politically reactionary', and 'To Autumn' 'attempt[s] to "escape" the period which provides the poem with its context'. This argument initiated a series of historical interpretations of 'To Autumn' (by such critics as Paul Fry,¹⁴ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Roe), many of which repudiate McGann's position and attempt to read the poem in explicitly political terms. Bennett's *Keats, Narrative, and Audience* argues that the 'perfected language of pastoral description is invaded by political questions of lawful exchange, agricultural boundaries and labour relations',¹⁵ whilst Roe's 'Keats's Commonwealth' offers a riposte to McGann which reads 'To Autumn' in the light of the 'discourses of political and social justice after the outrage at Peterloo'.¹⁶ Roe's argument is detailed and nuanced, and should be read in full. However, it can be exemplified by his argument that the massacre at Manchester is hinted at in the imagery of the poem: 'in the "reaping hook", the "last ooziings" of the "cyder-press", the "soft-dying day", and the "rosy hue" of the "scubbe-plains". Through such verbal details the apocalyptic harvest of the fields of St Peter is quietly acknowledged.'¹⁷ Here the Keatsian lyricism of 'To Autumn', rather than attempting escape from personal suffering or political turmoil, is seen as subtly engaged with sociopolitical reality.¹⁸

1

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun,¹⁹
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd,²⁰ and plump the hazel shells

1

- 6 Abrams, 'Keats's Poems', p. 45.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 51–2.
- 8 Douglas Bush, 'Keats and His Ideas', in M. H. Abrams (ed.), *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 337.
- 9 Ian Jack, *Keats and the Mirror of Art*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967, p. 235.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 234.
- 11 Ian Jack, *English Literature 1815–1832*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 119. Jack later published a detailed account of Keats's 'painterly' vision in 'To Autumn' in *Keats and the Mirror of Art*, pp. 232–43.
- 12 Aileen Ward, *John Keats: The Making of a Poet*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1963, p. 322.
- 13 'Poem and Ideology: A Study of Keats's "To Autumn"', in Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays*, Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1975, pp. 124–46. Hartman's essay argues for the historical and ideological status of 'To Autumn', but only in terms of its status as a meditation on poetics: 'Keats's poem is indeed an event in history; not in world-history, however, but simply in the history of fiction' (p. 126).

- 14 See Paul Fry, 'History, Existence, and "To Autumn"', in 'Keats and Politics: A Forum', in *Studies in Romanticism*, 25, 1985, pp. 211–19. Fry's essay explicitly repudiates McGann's. See also David Worral, *Radical Culture, Discontent, Resistance and Surveillance, 1790–1820*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992, pp. 201–2.
- 15 See Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative, and Audience*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 162–4.
- 16 'Keats's Commonwealth', in Nicholas Roe, *Keats and History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 194–211.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- 18 The source of the present text is the poem's first publication in *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and other Poems* (1820).
- 19 The sun ripens the earth's produce, though it itself might also be seen as maturing as the year wanes.
- 20 i.e. the flesh of the fruit.

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-brimm'd their clammy cells.

10

2
Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless²¹ 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,²² while thy hook²³
Sparest 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.

20

3
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,²⁴ borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn,²⁵
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

30

From 'The Fall of Hyperion. A Dream'

In late July 1819, when he was staying at Shanklin on the Isle of Wight, Keats decided to recast his fragmentary epic *Hyperion*, which he had abandoned three months earlier. The most significant innovation in 'The Fall of Hyperion' is the

introduction of a framing narrative in the form of a dream vision.¹ The initial setting is a mysterious forest bower, where the narrator, a poet, discovers a feast laid out near an arbour and drinks from a 'cool vessel' which, unbeknown to him, has narcotic properties (lines 19–60). Waking, he finds the arbour gone, replaced by the enormous temple of Saturn, within which is an altar tended by the goddess Moneta (61–106). The poet then undergoes a trial in which he must climb the altar's steps or 'die on that marble' (107–36). There ensues a discourse (136–290) between the poet and the priestess about the varieties of human experience. Seeking insight into the sorrow which torments Moneta, the poet is granted god-like (though tormenting) powers of perception which allow him to view the torments of Saturn and the Titans (an adapted version of the existing narrative of *Hyperion*. A *Fragment* begins at line 294). 'The Fall of Hyperion', like its predecessor, was never completed, and breaks off early in its second canto. Tinkering apart, Keats had ceased composition by 21 September 1819, on which date he writes to Reynolds that 'I have given up *Hyperion*'. Though ill-health has been cited as a cause for his decision to give up the poem,² Keats's letter gives poetical reasons: 'there were too many Miltonic inversions in it – Miltonic verse cannot be written but in an artful or rather artist's humour; 'I wish to give myself up to other sensations,' Keats declares; the 'true voice of feeling' rather than 'the false beauty proceeding from art'. 'The Fall of Hyperion' remained unpublished until 1848,³ and was little read until the turn of the twentieth century. The poet Robert Bridges, writing in 1895, was one of the first to argue for its importance, seeing the fragment as Keats's 'most mature attempt [...] to express his own convictions concerning human life'. Since then, the poem has grown in critical estimation. For M. R. Ridley, it sees its author 'climb[ing] to a higher point than he had ever reached in poetry',⁴ whilst for Harold Bloom it is 'the culmination of Keats's work'.⁵

Perhaps paradoxically, 'The Fall of Hyperion' is a dream vision which attacks dreaming. The key dialogue between the poet and Moneta draws a distinction between the humanitarian 'poet' and the self-indulgent 'dreamer'. 'Dreamers weak' are lost in escapist fantasy, ignoring the sufferings of their fellow men. The

21 Carefree.

22 A reference to the poppy's narcotic properties.

23 Reaping blade.

24 Willows.

25 Boundary. Keats's elegiac tone here also suggests an echo of *Hamlet*: 'The dread of something after death, / The undiscovered Country, from whose Borne No Traveller returns' (III. i. 79–80).

1 An allegorical narrative poem which tells a story which was experienced by the narrator in a dream. The most notable European example is Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which Keats knew intimately and which, according to J. L. Lowes, provided an important model for the first section of 'The Fall of Hyperion' (J. L. Lowes, 'Moneta's Temple', *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, 1936, pp. 1098–13).

2 By Walter Jackson Bate most particularly. See Bate, *John Keats*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1963, p. 614.

3 In Richard Monckton Milnes's *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains of John Keats*, 2 vols. London: E. Moxon, 1848. The textual base here is that found in *John Keats: The Poetical Works*, ed. H. B. Forman, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906.

4 M. R. Ridley, *Keats' Craftsmanship: A Study in Poetic Development*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933, p. 280.

5 Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press (1st edn 1961), rev. edn 1971, p. 427.