

KEATS AND HIS POETRY
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CHAPTER 10

Keats's commonwealth

Nicholas Roe

Sad sixteenth of August! accursed be the day;

When thy field, oh, St. Peter! was crimson'd with gore . . .

'Manchester Y—Y Valour', *Manchester Observer*, 18 September 1819

When Keats's readers opened *Lamia*, *Isabella*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, and *Other Poems* they discovered that the book began with an apology. The publisher's Advertisement (which famously angered Keats) drew attention to 'the unfinished poem of HYPERION', explaining that the unfavourable reception of *Endymion* had 'discouraged the author from proceeding'. By noticing Keats's discouragement, Taylor and Hessey hoped to forestall hostile criticism of his third collection of poetry, and it has recently been suggested that a quality of passive reconciliation is characteristic of the volume as a whole. 'Keats's 1820 poems . . . were issued not to provoke, but to allay conflict', Jerome McGann has said:

The *Lamia* volume represented Keats's effort to show his readers how they might, by entering his poetic space, step aside from the conflicts and tensions which were so marked an aspect of that period. The whole point of Keats's great and (politically) reactionary book was not to enlist poetry in the service of social and political causes – which is what Byron and Shelley were doing – but to dissolve social and political conflicts in the mediations of art and beauty.¹

In McGann's account the poems in Keats's 1820 volume define a 'reflexive world' that the same critic has elsewhere identified with Romantic Ideology, an ideal space far, far removed from contemporary history. Ironically, in seeking to historicise Keats's poems, McGann has emphasised their distance from the turbulent world in which they were written, first published, and reached their earliest readers. But that distance, or 'displacement', becomes in turn an index of historical pressures at work on and in the poetry. So McGann argues in *The Romantic Ideology* that 'Shelley's idealism, Byron's sensationalism,

and Keats's aesthetic poetry are all displaced yet fundamental vehicles of cultural analysis and critique: a poetry of extremity and escapism which is the reflex of the circumstances in which their work, their lives, and their culture were all forced to develop'. And, yet more emphatically: 'Byron and Shelley are most deeply engaged (in a socialist-activist sense) when they have moved furthest along their paths of displacement and escape.'²

In differentiating Keats's 'reactionary' poems from the socially and politically 'enlisted' writings of Byron and Shelley, however, McGann apparently concedes the inadequacy of Romantic ideology to discriminate the full spectrum of the poets' various relations to historical conflicts and tensions. Furthermore, printing 'engaged' in italics does not effectively demonstrate how social-political enlistment, in Byron's and Shelley's poems, coincides with the extremities of ideal displacement. The difficulty appears in the strong polarisation of this view of Romantic poetry and history, which obscures a wide range of possible attitudes and responses that intervene between social-political 'engagement' and 'paths of escape'. As a result, the unique texture of the individual poem is flattened, erasing the complex and subtle negotiations with history that may be traced through various aspects of the poem's vocabulary, form, style, and generic identity.³ A more accommodating view of the 'mediations of art and beauty' (at the levels of word, image, emblem) is necessary in order to comprehend the involvement of history and Romantic idealism – and this will be one of my concerns in the present essay.

As Susan Wolfson demonstrates elsewhere in this volume, Shelley had done much to initiate the myth of Keatsian 'escapism' when, in his Preface to *Adonais*, he described Keats's genius as 'delicate', 'fragile', 'beautiful', a 'young flower . . . blighted in the bud'.⁴ Nineteenth-century commentators elaborated this vulnerable figure into an unworldly genius, but they did so by way of assimilating a poet otherwise perceived as unsettling to contemporary literary, political, social, and sexual orthodoxies.⁵ Thomas De Quincey, recalling Keats in 1846, demonstrated this clearly. 'As a man, and viewed in relation to social objects', De Quincey said, 'Keats was nothing':

It was as mere an affectation when he talked with apparent zeal of liberty, or human rights, or human prospects, as is the hollow enthusiasm which many people profess for music, or most poets for external nature. For these things

Keats fancied that he cared; but in reality he cared not at all. Upon them, or any of their aspects, he had thought too little, and too indeterminately, to feel for them as personal concerns.

De Quincey ridiculed Keats's liberal, humane imagination by insisting (like other hostile critics since the poet's lifetime) on Keats's 'thoughtless' youth; 'childish years and childish inexperience'. The source of his irritation appears elsewhere in the essay, where De Quincey recognised Keats's poems as a powerfully articulate challenge to received ideas about linguistic and stylistic decorum: 'the most shocking revolt against good sense and just feeling'; 'the most shocking abuse of his mother tongue'; 'the deep treason of these unparalleled offences'.⁶

The subversive force of Keats's writing, acknowledged here by De Quincey, had been widely remarked in early reviews of the 1817 volume, and of *Endymion* in particular. Critical responses to the 1820 collection were generally welcoming, with *Lamia* and *Isabella* attracting favourable comment, although the volume did not allay conflict altogether. Indeed a number of reviewers continued to distrust Keats's politics, indicating that some contemporaries did not perceive the reactionary, escapist tendencies dwelt upon by later critics.

John Scott, writing in Baldwin's *London Magazine* (September 1820), protested at Keats's treatment by the *Quarterly* and *Blackwood's*, observing that 'the miserable selfishness of political party has erected itself into a literary authority'. Yet his review actually conceded the political ground on which the Tory critics had attacked Keats: 'his spirit is impregnated with a flippant impatience, (irritated and justified by a false philosophy) of the great phenomena of society, and the varieties of human nature'. According to Scott, the caricature of Isabella's brothers ('these same ledger-men . . . these money-bags', 137, 142) betrayed 'all sorts of dissenting, and altercating principles and opinions', and he concluded 'it will easily be seen that [Keats] has very much, and very incautiously exposed himself to attack'. Josiah Conder, in the *Eclectic Review* (September 1820), agreed with Scott in asserting that 'there does not occur, if our recollection serves us, throughout [Keats's] present volume, a single reference to any one object of *real* interest, a single burst of virtuous affection or enlightened sentiment, a single reference, even of the most general kind, to the Supreme Being, or the slenderest indication that the Author is allied by any one tie to his family, his country, or his kind'. Both of these critics were in fact well-disposed to Keats's ambitions as

a poet; nevertheless, each recognised Keats as a 'malcontent'. An alternative view of Keats's politics appeared in the *Indicator* (2 August 1820), where Leigh Hunt argued that the 1820 poems were 'coloured by the modern philosophy of sympathy and natural justice' and 'a high feeling of humanity'; the expression of 'an age of poetry [that] has grown up with the progress of experiment'.⁷

As with Keats's earlier publications, therefore, the response to his 1820 collection divided according to 'political party'. The liberal disposition welcomed by Hunt was condemned by reviewers such as Conder, for whom Keats's poetry expressed a treacherous sensibility recalling the Jacobins of the 1790s: 'At present, there is a sickness about his productions, which shews there is a mischief at the core'.⁸ Furthermore, by echoing *To Autumn*, Conder associates 'mischief' with a poem that has been widely understood as an expression of Keats's quietism. In Geoffrey Hartman's celebrated essay 'Poem and Ideology', for instance, it is presented as 'a poem without explicit social context', the voice of a 'true impersonality'.⁹ Taken together, these contrasting responses to the poetry suggest that the liberalism of the 1820 volume may have been expressed in *To Autumn* as a covert mischief, the more potent for working under the sign of disinterested imagination, or 'negative capability'.

To Autumn offers an ideal, 'impersonal' image of the season. History, in this poem, has been assimilated to the natural revolutions of seasonal change, processes that are arrested, almost, and redeemed by autumnal beauty and plenitude. For Hartman *To Autumn* was best understood as a *Convivio*, a banquet of English sounds and foods that nourished Keats's imagination after he had abandoned the sublime, Miltonic voice of the *Hyperion* poems.¹⁰ A collateral interpretation has been offered by McGann, who reads *To Autumn* as 'the finished expression' of Keats's tranquil mood at Winchester during September 1819; 'Winchester, and his time there, are repeatedly seen [in Keats's letters] as a respite from the tensions not only of his own personal affairs, but of the contemporary social scene at large.' As McGann puts it, Keats 'found Winchester a wonderful refuge'; 'The city and its environs [were] magical in their ability to carry him away to a charmed world far removed from the quotidian press of his money affairs and the dangerous political tensions of his society' (*KHM*, 58). In this contextual reading of *To Autumn* McGann coincides with Hartman's (manifestly anti-historical) understanding of the poem as 'enchanted ground', a spellbound refuge from history. But maybe a

treasonable conspiracy to alter by force the constitution of the realm as by law established'. To Lord Eldon, the Chancellor, the meeting had been 'an overt act of conspirators, to instigate . . . specific acts of treason'.¹⁴ *The Times* pronounced on the 'dreadful fact' of the violence at Manchester *before* the detailed account from the paper's reporter, John Tyas, had arrived in London. This leading article established the popular belief 'that nearly a hundred of the King's unarmed subjects have been sabred by a body of cavalry in the streets of a town of which most of them were inhabitants' – although Tyas's eyewitness version, published in the same edition of *The Times*, 19 August 1819, contradicted the leading article in some details. Both the leader and Tyas's report were widely reprinted and appeared in two opposition newspapers that published Keats's writings and which he is known to have read. These were the *Examiner*, edited by Leigh Hunt, and the *Champion*, edited in 1819 by John Thelwall – a leading reformist since the 1790s. Both journals followed *The Times* in agreeing on the 'dreadful fact' of what had happened in Manchester, but of course interpretations of the event differed (and still do so today). The *Examiner* reported 'disturbance' and 'atrocities' at Manchester; the *Champion* warned about 'ANARCHISTS in MILITARY UNIFORM', the breakdown of justice, and the possibility that military action against the people might provoke a violent revolution. When Henry Hunt and other leading reformists were arrested and imprisoned (the *Champion* noted that the magistrates 'brought against them a charge of conspiracy to alter the laws by force and threats'.¹⁵) During the weeks after Peterloo, the *Champion* elaborated an alternative theory of conspiracy in which the powers of the state were aligned against the liberties and democratic aspirations of the people.

For Thelwall, the reformists at Peterloo were to be identified with 'the cause of the people at large – of the Laws and the Constitution'. At St Peter's Fields the crowd had called for annual parliaments and universal suffrage; in one section of a banner held aloft in the crowd, 'Justice' was represented 'holding the scales in one hand, and a sword in the other'. From Thelwall's point of view, the military intervention was an act of 'lawless, and ruthless murder', an 'abhorrent massacre'.¹⁶ Then, on Sunday 19 September 1819 – the day on which Keats first drafted *To Autumn* – the *Champion* published an analysis of contemporary events:

There is indeed, we believe, A SERIOUS CONSPIRACY IN

MANCHESTER – a Conspiracy of those whom fortune has favoured, to depress and keep down the less fortunate multitude whose labour has been the instrument of that favour: – a Conspiracy of the Rich against the Poor – a species of conspiracy certainly not less frequent (as it is certainly much more practicable) than a conspiracy of the poor against the rich: – nay a conspiracy which we might almost venture to say, always precedes, and not unfrequently produces, that of the latter description. These Opulent Conspirators wish to prevent the labouring classes from aspiring to any political rights – because political rights have a tendency to secure personal liberty and personal consideration. The confederacies and combinations they practice among themselves, they would interdict entirely their poorer brethren, that they may keep them in abject and entire dependence: and what the law cannot, or will not insure for them, in this respect, they would accomplish by the terrors of the sword. If nothing else will keep down the half-famishing labouring poor and stifle the cry of their complaints, it has been thought that massacre would.¹⁷

Keats could not have read this column on 19 September (it would have taken a day for copies to reach *Winchester* from London). On the other hand, political debate in August and September 1819 focused on the word 'conspire', and Thelwall was evidently responding to – and amplifying – theories of state conspiracy that were current in the broad range of reformist discourse in the months after Peterloo. The various theories of conspiracy were available to Keats in the national journals, and in material from those papers reprinted locally in the *Salisbury* and *Winchester Journal*.¹⁸ But Keats's poem is not radical polemic like Thelwall's articles in the *Champion* or, for that matter, Shelley's incandescent response to Peterloo in *The Masque of Anarchy*. How can one make a credible link between the ongoing discussion of political crisis in the newspapers and conspiracy in *To Autumn*, so as to elucidate the politics of autumnal beauty in Keats's poem? A possible answer, I think, is via the literary and political columns of Leigh Hunt's *Examiner*.

THE CALENDAR OF NATURE

And Libra weighs in equal scales the year . . .

'Autumn', James Thomson, *The Seasons*

The *Examiner* for 5 September 1819 (just before Keats's visit to London) contained much on Peterloo, and also Leigh Hunt's regular monthly column entitled 'The Calendar of Nature'. The latter item has been noticed before in criticism of *To Autumn*, most recently in

William Keach's essay on the political and cultural significances of Keats's poetic styles.¹⁹ Hunt's 'Calendar' has not been reproduced fully in this context, however, so that its relation to Keats's poem may reward some further consideration. The 'Calendar' begins with the 'September' stanza from Spenser's *Mutabilite Cantos*, long recognised as the source for some images in *To Autumn*:

September.

Next him September marched eke on foot;
Yet was he heavy laden with the spoyl
Of harvest's riches, which he made his boot,
And him enriched with bounty of the soyle:
In his one hand, as fit for harvest's toyle,
He held a knife-hook; and in th'other hand
A paire of weights, with which he did assoyl
Both more and lesse, where it in doubt did stand,
And equal gave to each as justice duly scanned. Spenser.

The poet still takes advantage of the exuberance of harvest and the sign of the Zodiac in this month, to read us a lesson on justice.

Autumn has now arrived. This is the month of the migration of birds, of the finished harvest, of nut-gathering, of cyder and perry-making, and, towards the conclusion, of the change of colour in trees. The swallows, and many other soft-billed birds that feed on insects, disappear for the warmer climates, leaving only a few stragglers behind, probably from weakness or sickness, who hide themselves in caverns and other sheltered places, and occasionally appear on warm days. The remainder of harvest is got in; and no sooner is this done, than the husbandman ploughs up his land again, and prepares it for the winter grain. The oaks and beeches shed their nuts, which in the forests that still remain, particularly the New Forest in Hampshire, furnish a luxurious repast for the swine, who feast of an evening in as pompous a manner as any alderman, to the sound of the herdsman's horn. But the acorn must not be undervalued, because it is food for swine, nor thought only robustly of, because it furnishes our ships with timber. It is also one of the most beautiful objects of its species, protruding its glossy green nut from its rough and sober-coloured cup, and dropping it in a most elegant manner beside the sunny and jagged leaf. We have seen a few of them, with their stems in water, make a handsome ornament to a mantle-piece, in this season of departing flowers.

The few additional flowers this month are corn-flower, Guernsey-lilies, starwort, and saffron, a species of crocus, which is cultivated in separate grounds. The stamens of this flower are pulled, and dried into flat square cakes for medicinal purposes. It was formerly much esteemed in cookery. The clown in the Winter's Tale, reckoning up what he is to buy for the sheepshearing feast, mentions 'saffron to colour the warden-pies'. The fresh

trees and shrubs in flower are bramble, chaste-tree, laurustinus, ivy, wild honeysuckle, spires, and arbutus or strawberry-tree, a favourite of Virgil, which, like the garden of Alcinous, in Homer, produces flower and fruit at once. – Hardy annuals, intended to flower in the spring, should now be sown; annuals of curious sorts, from which seed is to be raised, should be sheltered till ripened; and auriculas in pots, which were shifted last month, moderately watered.

The stone-curlew clamours at the beginning of this month, wood-owls hoot, the ring-ouzel reappears, the saffron butterfly is seen, hares congregate; and, at the end of it, the woodlark, thrush and blackbird, are heard.

September, though its mornings and evenings are apt to be chill and foggy, and therefore not wholesome to those who either do not or cannot guard against them, is generally a serene and pleasant month, partaking of the warmth of summer and the vigour of autumn. But its noblest feature is a certain festive abundance for the supply of all creation. There is grain for men, birds, and horses, hay for the cattle, loads of fruit on the trees, and swarms of fish in the ocean. If the soft-billed birds which feed on insects miss their usual supply, they find it in the southern countries, and leave one's sympathy to be pleased with an idea, that repasts apparently more harmless are alone offered to the creation upon our temperate soil. The feast, as the philosophic poet says on a higher occasion,

The feast is such as earth, the general mother,
Pours from her fairest bosom, when she smiles
In the embrace of Autumn. To each other
As some fond parent fondly reconciles
Her warring children, she their wrath beguiles
With their own sustenance; they, relenting, weep.
Such is this festival, which from their isles,
And continents, and winds, and oceans deep,
All shapes may throng to share, that fly, or walk, or creep.

Shelley.

Just below the stanza from the 'philosophical poet' Shelley's *Revolt of Islam* is the heading 'LAW. Surrey Sessions. Tuesday, Aug. 31. Seditious Placards', returning the reader to an article about the controversial politics of the day.

The similarities between Hunt's 'Calendar of Nature' and *To Autumn* extend beyond 'harvest's riches' and the harvester's 'knife-hook' in Spenser. Details such as the migrating birds, cider-making, swallows and insects, warm days, and even the chill and fog all reappear in Keats's poem.²⁰ Most interesting in the present context, however, is the schooling that Hunt draws from Spenser and elaborates in his commentary and with the quotation from Shelley: 'The poet still takes advantage of the exuberance of harvest and the

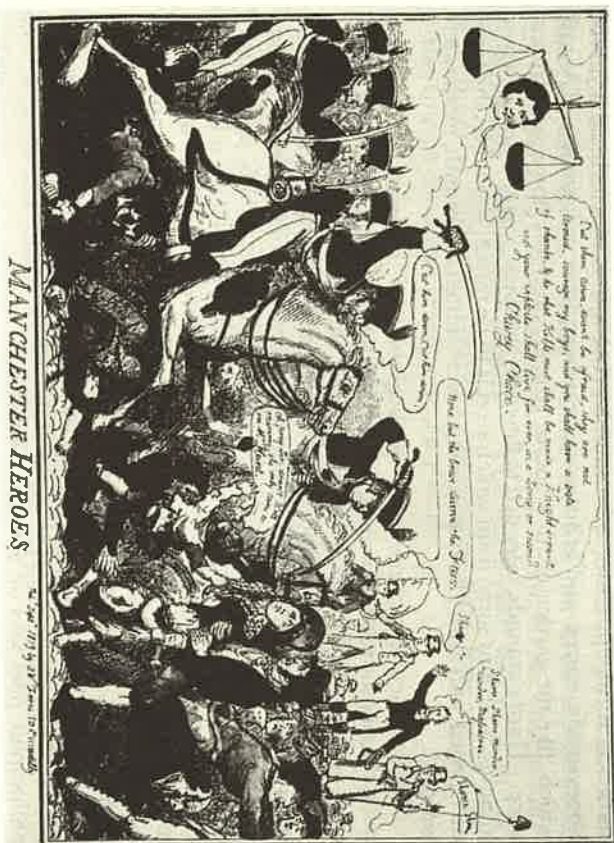


Figure 10.1 *Manchester Heroes*, attributed to George Cruikshank

sign of the Zodiac in this month, to read us a lesson on justice.)

Spenser's harvester uses a 'paire of weights' to divide the produce of autumn justly and equably. The image of the balance is especially appropriate to September (as Hunt notices) because the latter part of this temperate month lies under the constellation Libra, which depicts a pair of scales. Keats had been familiar with the image and seasonal significance of Libra since his schoolboy reading in John Bonycastle's *Introduction to Astronomy*: 'LIBRA, the Balance, one of the twelve signs of the zodiac, into which the sun comes about the 20th of September, or the beginning of autumn'.²¹ In addition to these seasonal and astronomical associations, during autumn 1819 the scales had immediate emblematic force in political debate. The reformists' banners at Peterloo had been emblazoned with the figure of Justice holding her scales, as an expression of their call for democratic rights and universal suffrage. And contemporary satirical prints such as 'Manchester Heroes' represented the *injustice* of Peterloo and its aftermath in a cartoon image of the Prince Regent as the fulcrum of a set of unbalanced scales. In this wider emblematic

context, the point of Leigh Hunt's 'lesson on justice' in his September 'Calendar of Nature' becomes apparent in mediating between political turmoil and seasonal fruitfulness. The 'exuberance of harvest' (literally *ex-uber*, from the breast of nature) is appropriately the season of justice, depicted by Hunt as a commonwealth – 'a certain festive abundance for the supply of all creation'. And Shelley's autumnal *Convivio*, the 'banquet of the free' in Canto Five of *The Revolt of Islam*, points the revolutionary meaning of Hunt's observations. The exuberance of 'earth, the general mother' feeds and reconciles the 'warring children', who share with all creation in the plenty of the season.

Turning from Spenser, Shelley, and 'The Calendar of Nature' to Keats's *To Autumn*, the conspiracy of sun and season may now appear less of an escape from historical tensions, than as a harvest-home fulfilling the call for justice from 'the less fortunate multitude'. There are of course no scales of justice overtly represented in *To Autumn* (as they had been in Spenser's verse, and as depicted on the protestors' banners at Peterloo). Nevertheless in formal terms and in some verbal details the three stanzas of Keats's poem exhibit a fine equity, resuming the current discourse of (in)justice as a politics of style; as Hartman has already pointed out, 'Each stanza . . . is so equal in its poetical weight, so loaded with its own harvest'.²² Hartman's perception of the poem's global equipoise as lyric can be substantiated further in specific images and emblems of balance, disclosed in the central stanza amid the store of autumn's plenty. The tress of hair, for example, is 'soft-lifted', floating upon the breath of the 'winnowing wind'; indeed, the version of the poem transcribed in Keats's letter to Richard Woodhouse, 21 September 1819, has 'winnowing wind', a misspelling that seems to concentrate in a single word the whole process of harvest in mowing, winnowing, and – perhaps – windmilling. The furrow of corn is 'half reaped', the next swath 'and all its twined flowers' yet to be harvested. And then there is the marvellous balancing movement of

... sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook . . .

– 'Steady', as Keats wrote in his copy of the poem for Woodhouse (*Letters*, ii. 170), intimating, as Christopher Ricks notes, both 'straight and steady': a justified progress.²³ In all of these verbal and

emblematic details the poem identifies balance and equity as particularly appropriate to autumn, 'a medium between summer and winter', articulating the beauty of the season in language and imagery that were also circulating in discourses of political and social justice after the outrage at Peterloo.

The third stanza of *To Autumn* returns the poem to the western world of change, loss, and mortality – already sensed, perhaps, in the 'clammy cells' of the bees – but with the acceptance of those processes of time that has been remarked by many readers of the poem. Crucially, however, that acceptance has been achieved through contemplation of natural abundance that was laden with intense social and ideological significance at the season of the poem's composition. There is, moreover, a biblical resonance to the language and imagery of *To Autumn* that deserves to be mentioned, for it enables us to hear the distant commotion of Peterloo even in the final *sotto voce* cadences of Keats's poem. Behind Keats's benign and generous harvest was the terrifying, apocalyptic reaping of the earth in Revelation 14:

19. And the angel thrust in his sickle into the earth, and gathered the vine of the earth, and cast it into the great winepress of the wrath of God.

20. And the winepress was trodden without the city, and blood came out of the winepress, even unto the horse bridles, by the space of a thousand and six hundred furlongs.

Some contemporary responses to Peterloo echoed these dreadful 'last ooziings' from the winepress,

– May the ghosts of the murdered your slumbers infest,
And drops of their blood be found in your wine . . . ²⁴⁷

– and Shelley in his *Masque of Anarchy* draws from the same source to orchestrate the 'ghastly masquerade' of the murderers,

Drunk as with intoxication
Of the wine of desolation. (48–9)

Elsewhere, 'the conspirators against the privileges of the People' were denounced in the prophetic voice of Revelation:

They shall not smell sweet and blossom in the dust; the wrongs which they have heaped upon society will adhere to them like the leprosy . . . time will disclose the secret; and then they may call on the heavens to hide, and the hills to cover them, but the outstretched arm of Offended Justice will seize these children of blood, even at the uttermost bounds of the earth. ²⁵

In the temperate lyrical clime of *To Autumn*, these sanguinary tones are chastened, residual, but discerned nonetheless, I think, in the reaping 'hook', the 'last ooziings' of the 'cyder-press', the 'soft-dying day', and the 'rosy hue' of the 'stubble-plains'. Through such verbal details the apocalyptic harvest of the fields of St Peter is quietly acknowledged, even as it is subdued in the slow gathering of the season and the poem itself towards a close. The figure of 'Offended Justice' remains, and it is to this focus of restitution in Keats's poem that I now wish to turn.

'WHO HATH NOT SEEN THEE?'

pray tell me what that tall majestic lady is, that stands there,
beautified with yellow hair, and crowned with a turban
composed of ears of corn; her bosom swells with breasts as white
as snow. Her right-hand is filled with poppies and ears of corn,
and in her left is a lighted torch.

Andrew Tooke, *The Pantheon*²⁶

Scarcity and want shall shun you;
Ceres' blessing so is on you.

The Tempest (4. 1. 116–17)

'Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?' As has frequently been pointed out (by Ian Jack, Helen Vendler, John Creaser, and others), Keats's personification of autumn has numerous mythical referents, the most notable of these being the goddess Ceres.²⁷ A well-informed classicist, Keats had known about Ceres from his schoolboy reading in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and (more especially) a number of classical dictionaries and anthologies of classical literature.

Three texts, which Charles Cowden Clarke recalled Keats reading at school, identify the various mythical associations of Ceres. Lemprière's *Bibliotheca Classica; or, A Classical Dictionary*, which Clarke says Keats 'appeared to learn', provides the typical image of Ceres, 'goddess of corn and harvests . . . represented with a garland of ears of corn on her head, holding in one hand a lighted torch, and in the other a poppy, which was sacred to her' (Ceres' resemblance to the figure on the Peterloo banner, with the torch and scales of justice, was not a coincidence – as will shortly appear). Joseph Spence's *Polymetis*, also read at school by Keats, offers an identical image of Ceres 'regarding the laborious husbandman from heaven; and blessing the work of his hands with success'.²⁸

There are notable parallels between Lemprière, Spence, and *To Autumn* apparent in these short extracts. It is Andrew Tooke's *Pantheon*, however, which elaborates the symbolic roles of Ceres in greatest detail, glossing a passage from the *Metamorphoses* which associates her with fruitfulness, labour on the land, and the origins of justice:

[Ovid... tells us that Ceres was the first that made laws, provided wholesome food, and taught the art of husbandry, of plowing and sowing: for before her time the earth lay rough and uncultivated, covered with briars and unprofitable plants. Where there were no proprietors of land, they neglected to cultivate it; when nobody had any ground of his own, they did not care to fix land-marks; but all things were common to all men, till Ceres, who had invented the art of husbandry, taught men how to exercise it: and then they began to contend and dispute about the limits of those fields from whose culture they reaped so much profit; and from thence it was necessary that laws should be enacted to determine the rights and properties of those who contended. For this reason Ceres was named the *Foundress of laws*.²⁹

Here, Ceres presides over land originally 'common to all men'; over food, farming, cultivation, and prosperity; and over the laws determining 'rights and properties' among contentious humankind. She represents nature's abundance, and also the rights and laws that determine a just distribution of that plenty.

If one glances back at Thelwall's account of the reformists at St Peter's Fields, one might contend that Ceres was the appropriate emblem of those 'labouring classes... aspiring to... political rights... personal liberty and personal consideration'. Certainly, the mythical associations of the goddess, uniting fruitfulness and justice, would have gained an extra resonance at a season when killings, trumped-up prosecutions, and rumoured conspiracies seemed likely to provoke a revolution. Perhaps, as Josiah Conder had said, there was mischief indeed at the core of Keats's 1820 collection. Yet in *To Autumn*, the goddess is a shadowy figure, not explicitly invoked although her presence may be assumed in the question 'Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?' The interrogation is knowing and very finely balanced, however, addressing the community 'who hath seen' but with a glancing acknowledgement of those who have not done so, in that they are unjustly excluded from their due share in autumn's plenty. This latter sense was in fact emphasised in Keats's draft of *To Autumn*, where the question was abbreviated as 'Who hath not seen thee?' And the succeeding lines of the draft momentarily admit the

deprived in search of restitution, 'Sometimes whoever seeks for thee may find thee', subsequently revised to 'Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find thee'.³⁰

POSTSCRIPT

When in 1821 Leigh Hunt republished his 'Calendar of Nature' as a volume entitled *The Months*, he prefaced the book with an advertisement mentioning that 'The good-nature with which this Calendar was received on its appearance in 1819... has induced its republication in a separate form, with considerable additions'. Hunt made no revisions to the text of 'September', but he did make one notable addition: the second and third stanzas of *To Autumn*.³¹ A living poet has happily personified autumn in some of the pleasantest shapes under which her servants appear', Hunt wrote, and incorporated Keats's poem within his own celebration of autumnal exuberance. In so doing, however, he explicitly associated *To Autumn* with the seasonal 'lesson on justice' that he had drawn from Spenser. If Hunt's 'Calendar of Nature' had offered Keats some ideas and images for *To Autumn*, in *The Months* the poem was republished by Hunt in a context that acknowledged the poem's fruitful conspiracy as an expression of Keats's commonwealth: 'a certain festive abundance for the supply of all creation'.

The generous equanimity of *To Autumn* was discovered amid the mists of personal anxieties and public unsettlement in September 1819. But to describe Keats's poem as 'escapist' is to assume the utter dissolution of those histories, and the ready access of ideal beauty as a reflexive alternative to the conflicts of the world. Indeed a current orthodoxy in Romantic criticism has understood the imagination as reactive and evasive, displacing history in the quest for a transcendent refuge. Scant attention has been accorded in such criticism to the intricate verbal processes by which history is acknowledged and addressed through the varied mediations of art and beauty. Conspiracy in *To Autumn* suggests that it may be helpful to reexamine the strategies by which such poems negotiate with history through lyrical intervention: to understand the thing of beauty as 'a joy forever', certainly, but also, and more immediately, as 'sylvan historian'.

NOTES

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¹ *KHM*, 53.

² See *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago and London, 1983), 117, 124, and *KHM*, 61–2 where, in discussing *To Autumn*, McGann defines the 'reflexive world of Romantic art' as 'the very negation of negation itself, wherein all events are far removed from the Terror, King Ludd, Peterloo, the Six Acts, and the recurrent financial crises of the Regency, and where humanity escapes the inconsequence of George III, the absurd Prince Regent, the contemptible Wellington'. For a questioning response to McGann's assertion, see the conclusion of Vincent Newey, "'Alternate uproar and sad peace': Keats, Politics, and the Idea of Revolution", in J. R. Watson (ed.), *The French Revolution in English Literature and Art*, *MHRA Yearbook of English Studies* 19 (1989), 265–89.

³ See Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London, 1976), 14, for 'a whole series of "levels" which "mediate" between text and social economic conditions'.

⁴ See D. Reiman and S. Powers (eds.), *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* (New York and London, 1977), 390–2. Shelley quotations will be from this edition.

⁵ See Susan Wolfson, 'Feminizing Keats', in H. de Almeida (ed.), *Critical Essays on John Keats* (Boston, 1990), 317–57, and my 'Keats's Lispering Sedition', *ELN* 42 (1992), 36–55.

⁶ 'Notes on Gillfillan's "Gallery of Literary Portraits". John Keats' in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* (April 1846); rpt. *KCH*, 308–10.

⁷ For Scott, Conder, and Hunt, see *KCH*, 219–27; 232–9; 165–77.

⁸ *KCH*, 238. For the 'dangerous voices' of childish sensibility in the 1790s, see David Fairer, 'Baby Language and Revolution: The Early Poetry of Charles Lloyd and Charles Lamb', *Charles Lamb Bulletin* 74 (April 1991), 33–52.

⁹ 'Poem and Ideology: A Study of Keats's "To Autumn"', in *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (Chicago and London, 1975), 126, 146.

¹⁰ 'Spectral Symbolism and the Authorial Self in Keats's *Hyperion*', in *The Fate of Reading*, 57–73.

¹¹ *KHM*, 61. See also Paul Fry's dissenting response to McGann, 'History, Existence, and "To Autumn"', *KP*, 211–19.

¹² See Keats to Fanny Brawne, 13 Sept. 1819; J. H. Reynolds, 21 Sept.; Richard Woodhouse 21–2 Sept.; C. W. Dilke, 22 Sept.; the George Keatses, 17–27 Sept.; *Letters*, ii, 160, 167, 169–75, 178, 185.

¹³ See *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1968), 753–6. For a full-length reassessment of Peterloo, see Robert Walmsley, *Peterloo: The Case Reopened* (Manchester, 1969).

¹⁴ Walmsley, *Peterloo*, 247, 339–40.

¹⁵ See *The Times* (19 Aug. 1819); *Examiner* (23 Aug.); *Champion and Sunday Review* (22 Aug.); 525; *Champion and Sunday Review* (19 Sept.), 595.

¹⁶ *Champion* (22 Aug. 1819), 526, 532; (12 Sept.), 574.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* (19 Sept. 1819), 591.

¹⁸ I am grateful to John Barnard for information about the political columns of the *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, in 1819.

¹⁹ 'Cockney Couplets: Keats and the Politics of Style', *KP*, 182–96.

²⁰ Ian Jack noted two further literary sources for Keats's autumnal imagery: illustrated editions of Thomson's *Seasons*, and John Aikin's *Natural History of the Year*. See *Keats and the Mirror of Art* (Oxford, 1967), 238–40.

²¹ (London, 1786), 420.

²² 'Poem and Ideology', 129.

²³ *Letters*, ii, 170–1, and Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford, 1974), 72–3.

²⁴ 'Manchester Y — Y Valour', in Walmsley, *Peterloo*, 263–4.

²⁵ 'Manchester Politics', *Manchester Observer* (11 Sept. 1819), in Walmsley, *Peterloo*, 273.

²⁶ (London, 1698; London and Edinburgh, 1783), 177–8.

²⁷ See *Keats and the Mirror of Art*, 232–43; Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1983), 233–88; Creaser, 'From "Autumn" to Autumn in Keats's Ode', *ELN* (1988), 190–214.

²⁸ Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, *Recollections of Writers* (London, 1878), 124; J. Lemprière, *Bibliotheca Classica; or, A Classical Dictionary* (3rd edn, London, 1797), unpaginated; Spence, *Polymetis; or, An Inquiry Concerning the Agreement between the Works of the Roman Poets, and the Remains of the Ancient Artists* (2nd edn, London, 1755), 103.

²⁹ *Pantheon*, 179.

³⁰ See the draft of *To Autumn* reproduced in Jack Stillinger (ed.), *John Keats. Poetry Manuscripts at Harvard. A Facsimile Edition* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1990), 222. For a reading of *To Autumn* as 'an apotheosis of and fertility' see David Worrall, *Radical Culture. Discourse, Resistance and Surveillance, 1790–1820* (Hemel Hempstead, 1992), 201–2.

³¹ *The Months Descriptive of the Successive Beauties of the Year*, 5, 102–9.