

Thoughts on the Autumn Ode of Keats

DONALD PEARCE

To Autumn

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;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
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-brimmed their clammy cells.

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,
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spares 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 cider-press, with patient look,
Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

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

IT is, of course, a superb "Landscape," in the opinion of some the finest in the language, a poem of almost pure description. Is it anything more? To Kenneth Muir, writing in 1958, and speaking pretty much for an entire generation of critics, the answer appears to be "No":

"*To Autumn*, the last of the odes, requires little commentary . . . Keats describes Nature as she is . . . The poem expresses the essence of the season, but it draws no lesson, no overt comparison with human life."¹ If by "describing Nature as she is" Muir means that Keats has recorded the scene before him objectively, one would have to reply that except in most general seasonal terms there is simply no way one can know whether or not that was the case. It would be my guess, however, that Keats was being quite selective. Obviously certain things about the season have been stressed, others barely touched on, still others ignored altogether: no one, for example, is shown doing any work; nor is there a hint of rain anywhere (in England, in Autumn!) He seems in fact to have included only those aspects of the season that agreed with the special point of view from which he was regarding it. But what, after all, is a point of view? It is a window, precisely, in an attitude. Which is to say, it is inherently a critical act. Under even the simplest natural description there is bound to lie some metaphysical bedrock — something in virtue of which certain attitudes toward a scene (hence certain values) are celebrated and others excluded (or even, by implication, opposed). On a priori grounds alone, therefore, I should want to call "*To Autumn*" a meditative poem, a philosophical poem. But philosophical about what?

A rich autumn landscape, done by a youthful poet of love and nature, in an apparently happy frame of mind. The most innocent-looking of poems. Which of course it is, though at the same time is not — for the "rich autumn landscape" isn't the only poem that is here. One soon becomes aware of a second poem, just below the surface of the familiar one, a poem so intent, so looming, so full of wonder, that you almost hold your breath reading it. This under poem, or inner poem, is the one I want to consider in these notes. Parts of it can be seen immediately, registered here and there at the surface, so to

speak, of the outer poem as a visible disturbance in the syntax. The ode opens in fact with an instance of this, where in spite of the stanza's appearance of weight and calm there is plainly enough emotional stress occurring somewhere below the surface of the lines to disrupt the grammatical structure of the stanza and produce not the completed thought or statement one had expected but an interrupted, suspended, eleven line sentence-fragment instead. It is a great opening certainly, and wonderfully dramatic: in the very act of reading it, the stanza changes from quiet descriptive statement, to exclamation, to sustained apostrophe, almost requiring of the reader a triple take. And then the calm fashion in which Keats manages this piece of virtuosity, with all the confidence in the world trailing that salutation out over a succession of present infinitives (six of them!) like a vine over a series of vine props, or like the season's own quiet succession of warm afternoons: "Season of mists . . . conspiring how . . . to load . . . to bless . . . to fill . . . to swell . . . to plump . . . to set budding . . ." You wonder if it is ever going to end, but end it does, to break off abruptly and hang suspended in mid air, till engaged by the waiting "Who hast not seen thee . . .?" of the next stanza, where it is not fully resolved either, final resolution not really occurring till the "Thou-hast-thy-music-too" section far down the ode in stanza three. The main rhetorical schema of the ode would then be reducible to something like: *Season of mists . . . Who has not seen thee? . . . Heard thee? . . .* upon which simple triadic framework Keats mounts a thirty-three line salute to the autumn season that for fugal duration of tone and cadence must surely be the equal of anything in the work of his admired Spenser or Milton.

"Fugal" won't do; too busy, too ostentatious, in connotation. I want a quieter term. What is the actual structure of this poem? How is it organized? Those three solid, self-assured stanzas, all that accomplished

polyphony, the plump English diction, the slow forward movement line after line of the sense — everything seems to conspire to give the impression of orderly succession. Those critics who have commented on its structure, if they haven't always been in agreement as to its exact form have at least agreed that it is basically consecutive, the stanzas moving in orderly sequence, like a piece of music from the opening apostrophe, through the great personifications, to the quiet benediction of the close. And there is discernible progress also, as has often been noted, in the early→ to middle→to late autumn imagery (which would hardly have been unintentional on Keats's part.) But I believe there is another principle of order in this poem than sequentiality, taking priority over sequence because more in harmony with the deeper concerns of the poem, viz. that of a *contemplation*. As I understand this special mental state, its distinguishing quality is that it is "plotless," non-directional, without appetency; it is static attention, attention without progress.

That "To Autumn" more resembles a contemplation than a narrative (or pictorial) sequence became clear the moment I saw that the various presented events, though they may be followed consecutively, have in fact no "necessary" connections with each other. That is to say, they are joined not by any logical plot or argument but simply *by the fact of taking place*. Not that the vines, flowers, birds, fields form only a loose collage; they exhibit more design and coherence than that — a contemplation, after all, is not a jumble. I mean, instead, that it is by accumulation rather than by progression of effects, by co-presence rather than by sequence, that they are able to *become* Autumn in the end.

Non-dependence on what Keats (with apparent distaste) called "consecutive reasoning," keeping it anyway to a minimum, has the effect of permitting the speaker's genuine purity of attitude to touch and waken every object in the scene. Nowhere is there the slightest hint of coer-

cion among the components. Nothing appears subjected to the needs of anything else, is cowed, or mystified, by anything else. Each thing is free to be wholly what it is, in its own self-satisfying right — fruits, bees, gnats, lambs, birds, all those strong and diverse egos coexisting in virtually edenic harmony simply because there is nowhere any recourse to hierarchy among them — that, precisely, is the principle which is absent. There is only this brimming landscape, filled with these blissful creatures and processes, all of them freely realizing themselves, declaring themselves, yet not one a mere anarchic entity-in-itself!

Still, it is Autumn, the year is ending, and they along with it — of that they can hardly be unaware. Why are they so happy then? They ought rather to be sad, seeing that what they are doing, no matter how blissfully, is taking leave of life. And indeed the last stanza is, I believe, ordinarily considered to be death-haunted: it is evening, light is fading, the landscape exhausted; small gnats are beginning to mourn, birds to migrate; the verb “die” is even used twice in the space of five lines. Thus, for instance, Harold Bloom, in *The Visionary Company*:

Winter descends here as a man might hope to die, with a natural sweetness, a natural movement akin to . . . the organizing songs of Keats's swallows as they gather together for flight beyond winter . . . The departing birds, seeking another warmth, close the poem, which has climaxed in an acceptance of process beyond the possibility of grief.

This has all of Bloom's characteristic freshness as a reading, but it is marred, I think, by certain venerable stock-responses: Autumn = mortality; evening = dying; the gathering swallows = migratory birds fleeing impending winter (i.e. death), etc. Actually, however, Keats's swallows may not be gathering at all for the purpose of departing for warmer climes, but for the purpose of pursuing their evening meal with (being young adults) impressive aerial skill and the keenest of appetites just as long as there is light to fly by. As for the “mourning” gnats, their

note needn't strike one as monitory either; it seems to me sensuous and, so to speak, golden, the evening counterpart of the bees', and graver in tone because there are kinds of joy that are too rich for a bustling gaiety and laughter. Heard in concert, moreover, with the other sounds and voices in the stanza they seem to be blessing the time, rather than grieving over it. (The individual gnats, for that matter, are dancing!) The roots of joy in this poem may be profound, but they are not obscure. We tend — it is one of our cultural myths — to think of the year, hence of human life, as running downhill toward Autumn. But, on the contrary, "The nature of a thing," as Aristotle points out in the *Politics*, "is in its end — what it is when it is fully developed." This is not seen at the beginning, nor in the intermediate stages, but only at the fulfillment. The year's fulfillment is the harvest, indeed the having-been-harvested; that is the *telos* of the year, the climax toward which the entire process, once set in motion, had expectantly tended — the year's epiphany, or manifestation, the revealed truth of the year. Why shouldn't the things of Autumn rejoice?

Keats has combined two seemingly contradictory feeling-states in this poem — bucolic repose and alert, almost riveted, attention. It is quite marvellous, I think, though it is not strictly peculiar to this ode; one encounters it (or something like it) fairly frequently in Keats, for he loved to play with oxymoron — in the "Grecian Urn," for instance, where although in lines one and two the urn is said to be a "bride of quietness," a "foster-child of silence," within seven lines it is found to be vibrating with pipes, timbrels, and "wild ecstasy." This contradiction (if that is what it is) is very different, however, from what we find in "To Autumn" and handled very differently by Keats. In the case of the "Urn," the quietness and the ecstasy are plainly viewed as separate and distinct states, even restricted to different "sides" of the urn, and alternately rotated for inspection, stanza by stanza, to remain

an unresolved paradox ("cold pastoral") right to the very end of the poem. In "To Autumn," on the other hand, the repose and the intensity marry and coexist with no seeming contradiction whatsoever. The reason for this is surely that the speaker's attitude toward the scene contains no tinge of interrogation (no "Who are these coming . . .?" "What little town . . .?" etc., which so tortured the speaker of the the "Urn"), but is a purer state entirely — which I would describe as a state of genuine wonder in the midst of familiar scenes and processes. It is lyric perception, pure because motiveless. There is not a single object or process in the scene which could possibly be unfamiliar to a farm boy, and yet everything in it is as intently and distinctly observed and reported as if it were just now occurring for the first time, or being seen for the first time: call it sacramental vision, "passion without desire" in Augustine's words, or (in the terminology of Keats's letters) a greeting that is both embrace and renunciation.

Yet Keats isn't concerned solely with purity of perception here. He is also affirming something about the divineness of the world, of natural existence. The poem is emphatic and eloquent on the point throughout, insisting that the sources of meaning and value are located not in some remote transcendental Beyond but in the immediate tissues of familiar things, that (in Blake's words) everything that lives is holy, that things give birth to meanings, that things *are* meanings. There is even a clear and distinct sense in which "To Autumn" the last of the odes and their undoubted climax, is the anti-Cartesian poem par excellence — a sort of heroic moment, or rallying point of wholeness and sanity in the middle of some accelerating nightmare. Filled to the brim with the "Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts," with naming rather than numbering, greeting rather than formulating, blessing rather than inspecting, affirmation rather than denial, what is it but the answer, or counter-scripture, to the "dubito" of Descartes' *First Meditation*?

There is a definite pattern of religious imagery running through the poem. In stanza one the sun and the season are seen as secret co-workers engaged in the performance of a rite whose purpose is to bring about a miracle (an abundant harvest). That they are something other than lay magicians — perhaps priest and priestess, possibly god and goddess — is seen from the fact that their purpose is not just to “load” the vines and trees with fruit but also to “bless” them. Their whole procedure, in fact has the order and gravity of a rite whose steps are almost listed and named as the lines proceed. In the second stanza, the genius of the season is personified as a dreaming maiden — more a priestess, however, than simple country girl, for her face has a rapt expression like that on the face of some tapestry madonna who knows she is somehow the source of the mystery on which she gazes. Stanza three consolidates the religious allusions and associations in the strongly implied image of a temple interior, divine service in progress: there is a “wailful choir” of “small gnats,” whose thin cloud floats or sinks like incense along the river-aisles, and the whole interior is suffused with a stained-glass light that falls from “barred” and “blooming” skies.

The effect of these lovely images is to transform and exalt the commonplace: something as merely routine as a seasonal change acquires the dignity of a sacred rite, and an ordinary natural process becomes a loving “conspiracy.” True, the effect of the conspiracy is to deceive the bees into thinking warm days will never cease. But it is a benign deception, and one that only serves to magnify the plentitude of the season: autumn after autumn will return, year after year, and there will always be later flowers for the bees. If they have been deceived, it is only by way of being undeceived: they have only relinquished one mortal illusion, that the year is ending, to enter a much greater year, that of the Timeless Present.

If we had only this one poem by Keats — no “Night-ingale,” no “Grecian Urn,” no *Hyperion* — we would have

all the evidence we would require to number him with the prophets. "To Autumn" is the work of a mind in a very pure state of illumination. It has the qualities of a beatitude: blessedness, inexhaustibility. Read, re-read, restudied again and again, like a passage of scripture it refuses to empty, even to diminish. There is, in fact, something inscrutable about it. For while it is a poem that demands nothing, claims nothing, insists on nothing, contains nothing to dispute about, praises no one, attacks no one, never once reflects upon itself, it is at the same time a poem absolutely brimming with the powerful presence of its central theme, the nearest equivalent to which might perhaps be Jesus's "consider the lilies of the field." Yet with what wonderful tact does Keats refrain from remarking of his trees and fields that "they toil not, neither do they spin"; how carefully he avoids pointing out that Solomon was not so beautifully arrayed as they are. The reason he can so refrain is that he understood perfectly the art of the beatitude, and the cast of mind behind it, understood that in the age of Jeremy Bentham, William Cobbett, and Adam Smith, in the very morning of industrialism, it would be by being a maximless object, and so the antithesis of its age, that his poem would best make its point, understood what we in the evening of the same day understand: that once one has looked at a moss'd cottage tree, an unreaped furrow, a stubble plain and seen not a marketable, or marketed, commodity but a timeless sacred object, he is already safely past the point of wanting to use them, or any part of the natural world for that matter, having begun instead to bless them.

There is a reciprocity, or transfer, of graciousness between the natural objects and the man-made things in Keats's scene. It flows from the objects to the things. The implements of agriculture and industry have the look of things that have been redeemed (from their fallen estate, that is, as mere tools). The threshing floor has become a temple of indolence; the reaping hook for the first time in

its history spares not cuts; the cider press is so sunk in its solemn rites and mysteries that it seems to be dreaming of cider rather than producing it. All the components of the scene, purged of immediate utility, have the appearance of things that are charmed with each other, obliged to each other, no longer related by function, or even by need, but solely by grace. It is how things would have looked, been looked at, in Eden, before the Fall.

A hundred years ago, fifty years ago, what was the literary status of this poem? A beautiful pastoral, that was all. Even as recently as twenty-five years ago I doubt that it could have been seen as the genuine prophecy which it is — it has taken the last quarter century to bring that out. All poems alter, no doubt, in significance with time, grow, deepen, dwindle, disappear, as they are “proved” or “disproved” by an ongoing history, most I am afraid passing into nothingness; but this one seems to have been altered in its very depths. It is unarguably a much greater poem today, has much more profundity and scope, than on the day of its first publication in 1820. What has changed, and has worked the change, is of course the subject with which it deals, the natural environment and our complex relationship to it. We live now with a globally-shared sense of environmental emergency, our consciousness of which has deeply affected this poem’s literary significance. The words are the same, the scene as bucolic as ever; but in its depths it has undergone a transformation and has emerged a prophecy.

It was always a prophecy potentially, in the sense that a later stage of any process will have been inherent in an earlier. But it is a prophecy for us in ways it could never have been for any generation of readers prior to our own. Having, as a culture, pursued in our dealings with nature a course the very opposite of the one celebrated by the ode, we have simply arrived at a point where its prophetic character has become fully apparent (more apparent, in fact, than it could have been to its author).

If you set this ode alongside almost any other nature poetry of the period, a question that might easily occur to you is: Whether trees, lakes, mountains, flowers, birds and other creatures of nature that have been used to express the still, sad music of humanity, the grandeur of cosmic law, universal harmony, failing creative powers, so forth, instead of their own bell-like selves and essences, haven't in some important respect been defrauded, or debased?

Keats's comments on Milton scattered throughout his letters I now find of central importance for the understanding of his intentions in "To Autumn." The following passage, from the long letter to George and Georgiana of 21 September 1819 (repeated with interesting variations later the same day in one to Reynolds), will illustrate:

I shall never become attach'd to a foreign idiom so as to put it into my writings. The Paradise Lost though so fine in itself is a corruption of our Language — it should be kept as it is unique — a curiosity — a beautiful and grand Curiosity. The most remarkable Production of the World. A northern dialect accommodating itself to greek and latin inversions and intonations. The purest english I think — or what ought to be the purest — is Chatterton's. The Language had existed long enough to be entirely uncorrupted of Chaucer's gallicisms, and still the old words are used. Chatterton's language is entirely northern. I prefer the native music of it to Milton's cut by feet. I have but lately stood on my guard against Milton. Life to him would be death to me. Miltonic verse cannot be written but in the vein of art — I wish to devote myself to another sensation —

It would be a plausible assumption that these remarks were made by Keats apropos of his decision to abandon *Hyperion*. They were not; he had already arrived at that decision a month or so earlier. In fact, they were made approximately forty-eight hours after the composition of "To Autumn." Which suggests to me that the ode and the critical strictures on Miltonic verse arose as simultaneous expressions — one as formulation, the other as demonstration — of certain conclusions he had reached about the diction and syntax of English verse by Fall 1819. Though his remarks might sound like casual epistolary

comments ("the purest english," "the native music") it would be a mistake to take them so; for behind them loomed (as who could be more aware than Keats?), the whole question of the genius and right use of English as a medium for poetry. ("Analysis, it is what all poets have done with the language about them." — W. C. Williams.)

One thing in particular which Keats's comments on Milton and Chatterton indicate is that the diction and syntax of "To Autumn" constituted a deliberate literary experiment, one that I believe was quite as deliberate as, say, Wordsworth's much more celebrated one in *Lyrical Ballads*. Not that experiment was unusual for Keats; almost everything he did bears the stamp of a never-ending quest for a style, a diction, a voice (one can sometimes detect several voices vying in the same poem — the case, I think, with "Ode to a Nightingale"). His latest experiment, the one to be called "To Autumn," though it had been developing in his thoughts for several years, was to require only a single afternoon to perform once its objective had clarified. What was that objective? It was to construct a poem in conformity with his latest convictions regarding "foreign idiom," "Chaucer's gallicisms," "the northern dialect," "the purest english," "the native music": in a word (thinking of that famous passage again) an experiment in determining how far it would be possible (and desirable) to compose in a diction from which all trace of Milton had been excluded. On the evidence of the letters and that of the poem itself, we can with confidence reconstruct the procedures guiding the experiment. They would have been two: (a) reduction to zero, or as near zero as possible, of all "greek and latin inversions and intonations"; and (b) exclusion, as far as possible, of words of romance-language origin.

The poem that resulted is obviously different in texture, music, diction and syntax from virtually everything else in his work; yet few would deny that it is also quintessentially Keatsean. Had the persistent search for his own voice

come down in the end to something as simple, though as radical, as eliminating Milton ("Life to him would be death to me") from his work? From our vantage point a hundred and fifty years later, however, I think we can go much further. We can say that his self-diagnosis had application so far beyond his own individual case that what was right in September 1819 for John Keats was, by the synecdoche of genius, right also for the future of the English language as a medium for poetry.

As far as "greek and latin inversions and intonations" go, with the exception of "loud bleat" and "treble soft" (stanza III), they have been altogether eliminated. The word order throughout is common English speech. No more "To what green altar, O mysterious priest/Lead'st thou that heifer . . ."; in its place are now lines so unaffected, so straightforward, as to read almost like statements: "Until they think warm days will never cease," "Summer has o'erbrimmed their clammy cells," "Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find," "The red-breast whistles from a garden croft." (Subject → predicate → object.) He might have had these very lines in mind (actually he was referring to some lines of Chatterton's), when he spoke next day in a letter to Reynolds of the beauty of "genuine English Idiom, in English words."

Exclusion of archaic and exotic rhetorical effects was one part of the experiment, exclusion of words having romance-language roots was the other. How well was the latter carried out? Spot comparisons of the vocabulary and syntax of "To Autumn" with those of some other poems written by Keats earlier the same year do, in fact, reveal some interesting contrasts. The following samples, taken at random from the poetry of 1819, are limited to fifty-six words each (approximately the length of a stanza of *The Eve of St. Agnes*). The number of words of romance origin in each has been totalled, and also the number of "Miltonic" archaisms, to yield a simple table.

	Words of romance origin (per 56 words)	"Miltonisms," archaisms, inversions (per 56 words)
Jan. 1819 <i>Eve of St. Agnes</i> (Stanza XXIV)	18	3
Apr. 1819 "Ode to Psyche" (Stanza 3)	19	4
Apr. 1819 <i>Hyperion</i> (Bk. III 1-9)	13	8
May 1819 "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (Stanza 1)	14	5
Sept. 1819 "To Autumn" (Stanza 2)	4	0

The above table is little more than a snapshot, so to speak, of Keats's stylistic practices during 1819; all the same, it points to some important differences between his management of diction, idiom, and syntax in the case of "To Autumn" and in that of most of the other poems written by him during that memorable year. It confirms, I think that the "verbal medium" of "To Autumn" was the product of conscious experiment, conducted along lines I have suggested — an experiment in recapturing what, writing only a day or so later to Reynolds, he called "the native music of English." Was there anything more to the experiment than that?

Keats's remark of September 1819, "I have but lately stood on my guard against Milton. Life to him would be death to me," doesn't reflect an opinion he had only just arrived at. A year and a half earlier in a letter to James Rice he had already asked, somewhat archly: "The devil put this whim into my head in the likeness of one of Pythagora's questionings, 'Did Milton do more good or harm to the world?'"² Two months later, writing to Reynolds, he is a bit blunter: "His [Milton's] philosophy, human and divine, may be tolerably understood by one not much advanced in years." He adds: "He did not think into the human heart as Wordsworth had done."³ By 1819, Miltonic purposiveness, and moral strenuousness, the very opposite of his own creed of "idleness" (as expressed, for instance, in "The Human Seasons": "contented so to

look/On mists in idleness — to let fair things/Pass by unheeded as a threshold brook”) has begun to seem repugnant. In March of that year, writing to George and Georgiana, he observes how very few men “have ever arrived at a complete disinterestedness of Mind”; Socrates and Jesus are the great exemplars of disinterestedness, which he now regards as the highest virtue in life. In the same month comes the “Ode on Indolence,” to which he affixed as epigraph Jesus’s words “They toil not neither do they spin.” On September 21, only two days after “To Autumn,” in the same letter with the great passage on Milton and Chatterton, he remarks, wonderfully: “In my walk today I stooped under a rail-way [railing] that lay across my path and asked myself ‘why I did not get over.’ Because, answered I, ‘no one wanted to force you under.’”⁴ Three days after this, he confides to George and Georgiana that “The only means of strengthening one’s intellect is to make up one’s mind about nothing — to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts. Not a select party.”⁵

Taken in wider context, then, Keats’s rejection of Miltonic style, diction and idiom in “To Autumn” clearly involved much more than a mere preference for one kind of verbal music over another. It signified, rather, a rejection of the corresponding sense of life. Style for a great writer is always meaning. It is itself content, not a coating upon content. The wrought-iron and marble magniloquence of *Paradise Lost* was the essential form of Milton’s thought—not something draped over it, or painted upon it. In rejecting that style Keats was also deliberately rejecting the philosophical and religious vision that underlay and informed it and for whose embodiment that style had been constructed by Milton in the first place. Renunciation of Milton’s style meant renunciation of the Miltonic universe.

It was a heady, but difficult, and probably a wrenching decision for Keats; one, moreover, that may very well have had adverse effects upon his physical health, for he adored Milton — as witness the tribute of the two Hy-

perions, where some of the grandest effects are, so to speak, Milton idealized, or (if there is such a thing) Milton glorified. Still, the going back to Milton had been a going backward, at best a wasteful digression, to conventional heroic narrative rather than forward to something that was of more immediate and genuine concern, viz. to take up the art of English poetry at the point to which Wordsworth had brought and left it — the autobiographical lyric. Is not, perhaps, the main literary significance of those poems to which Keats now turned, and of which "To Autumn" was the crowning achievement, that they are triumphant completions of the Wordsworthian lyric — elaborate autobiographies from which the ego has, as a friend says, "all but evaporated"? And also the reason why the odes still seem so alive, while the Hyperions — "beautiful and grand curiosities" though they be, as Keats remarked of *Paradise Lost* — seem dead?

A further, in this case extra-literary, significance which "To Autumn" has vis-à-vis Milton concerns the whole question of spiritual vision. Keats of course was no formal student of philosophical or religious history, what he knew of Reformation and Puritan theology probably coming to him largely from Milton; it was, in any case, closely associated in his mind with Milton. Now the post-Eden landscape envisaged by Milton for evicted Adam and Eve, their heirs and successors, the milieu of historical man, was mainly a purgatorial plain of toil and sorrow where, though "redemption thence" was promised through "one greater Man," life in the interval would be dangerous and hard in the extreme. Arm yourself, therefore, Michael warns Adam, with Christian virtues before venturing out into it:

. . . add
 Deeds to thy knowledge answerable; add faith;
 Add virtue, patience, temperance; and love,
 By name to come called Charity, the soul
 Of all the rest, then wilt thou not be loth
 To leave this Paradise, but shall possess
 A Paradise within thee, happier far.

All very well as advice, perhaps, for those who desire to conceive of life as basically a workshop, or proving ground, and who believe that indolence (pejorative for "pleasures of the senses") is inconsistent with virtue. But could anything be more antithetical to such a work-and-pray ethic — which by 1820 had come to invade so many facets of middle class English life — than the sensuous indolence of "To Autumn," with its celebration of fertility, its creed of self-fulfillment, its principle of pleasure-in-life rather than labor-in-life, pleasure itself seen not merely as value but source of value?

Keats's exclusion of all trace of Milton from both subject and medium of "To Autumn," represented in its deeper strategies a complex, subversive affirmation of the values of process and spontaneity over those of system, hierarchy, stasis, order; of "wise passiveness" and renunciation over conquest and mastery. (Keats doesn't want to do anything to or with that landscape.) What the ode "says" is, then, something like this: that we are, in ourselves, without intermediary systems of philosophy, religion, ethics, or science, able to know the pleasant body of this world, to enjoy it and to consecrate it; that disinterested loving perception is the true transactional form of that relationship; and that whenever that is the form, the content is certain to be a season (as he expressed it) of mellow fruitfulness.

NOTES

¹"The Meaning of the Odes," in *John Keats: A Reassessment*, ed. Kenneth Muir (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1958), pp. 72-73.

²*The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, two vols. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1958), vol. 1, p. 255.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 281-82.

⁴*Letters*, vol. 2, p. 168.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 213.