The Odes of John Keats

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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-eves 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-brimm'd 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 cyder-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 sallows, borne aloft
   Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
   Hedge-cricket's sing; and now with treble soft
   The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
   And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.
We arrive at the ode *To Autumn* with the other odes (and the interlude of *The Fall of Hyperion*) in mind. Once again Keats must find a female divinity to worship, and we ask whether it will be a classical goddess like Psyche, or allegorized motives like Fame, Ambition, and Poesy, or an artwork like the unravished bride-urn, or an allegorized emotion like Melancholy, or a tragic Muse like Moneta, or a figure from nature like the nightingale. He must find a constitutive trope: will he once again be ethical and homiletic, and turn to admonition, as he did in *Melancholy*; or will he be engaged in a fruitless and inconclusive dialectic, as he was in *Indolence*? Will he choose reduplication, as in *Psyche*, or reiteration, as in *Nightingale*? Will he be propositional and interrogatory, as he was in the *Urn*? Or will he be the visionary, as he was in *The Fall of Hyperion*, organized by its “Then saw I . . .”? Will he speak confessionally in the first person (“My heart aches”) or address himself in the second person (“No, no, go not to Lethe”) or will he be narrative (“One morn before me were three figures seen”)? Will he begin with a vision (as in *Indolence* and *Psyche*) or with an apostrophe to an artifact or a natural creature (as in the *Urn* and *Nightingale*)? And now that he has written about music and the visual arts and the working brain of inner Fancy and dramatic tragedy, can he find a way of writing about his own art, poetry? And will he once again offer the sense of entrance and exit—rapture followed by the journey homeward to habitual self? Or will he urge himself again, as in *Melancholy*, outward into heroism and strenuous experience? After the deathly visions of Melancholy and Moneta, how will he incorporate death once more? What new combination can he try of the mythological, the allegorical, the propositional, and the metaphorical, to make a more seamless joining than he had hitherto formed? What language will he find to embody the indistinguishability of Truth and Beauty, that truth he had so far been able only to assert, not to enact?
In his autumn sonnet, *When I have fears that I may cease to be*, Keats had compared his fertile brain to a field of corn; after eighteen months of meditation on that symbol (Keats’s mind was never far from Ceres), Keats returned to it for his finest ode, *To Autumn*. In the sonnet, Keats is, paradoxically, himself the field of grain and its reaper-gleaner. As the act of conceiving poems is paralleled to natural fruitfulness, his books are the garners into which his grain is gathered. A teeming brain becomes a ripe field; the act of writing is the reaping of that field; to have written all the poems one has been born to write is to have gleaned the full harvest from that teeming brain; and to have compiled one’s poems in books is to have stored away riches. Keats, apprehensive that he would not live long enough to continue his youthful reaping into a final gleaning, wrote his sonnet, fearing

> that I may cease to be
> Before my pen has glean’d my teeming brain,
> Before high-piled books, in charactry,
> Hold like rich garners the full ripen’d grain.

In the sonnet, the implications of the symbol are not worked out; Keats nowhere confronts the fact that a high pile of books will leave a field entirely bare, the last gleanings gone, the teeming brain empty and stripped. The ode *To Autumn* continues the metaphor onward to the sacrificial base of harvest, and does not avert its eyes. It contains Keats’s most reflective view of creativity and art, not least because it is a poem springing from so many anterior poems, both those of Keats and those of his predecessors.

The essential antecedents of *To Autumn* include, besides *When I have fears*, Shakespeare’s sonnets “That time of year” and “How like a winter”; Spenser’s Mutability Cantos; Milton’s *Il Penseroso* and the Eve and Eden of *Paradise Lost*; Wordsworth’s Intimations Ode; Coleridge’s *Frost at Midnight*; and Keats’s own *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, as well as his sonnets on the human seasons and the poetry of the earth. From these poems and others, several strands which enter the “mingled yarn” of *To Autumn* are borrowed. These include the poet’s own fear of dissolution (connected in his mind with
sexuality, as we can see from La Belle Dame above all); the connection between natural creation and the naming which is the proper work of poetry (Milton’s concern in retelling the Creation); the relation of mutability to inception and growth; the assertion that all aspects of the world are equally beautiful (borrowed from Il Penseroso and Frost at Midnight); the notion that the mind projects its own mood on the essentially neutral world (“How like a winter”); and the perennial parallel—which Keats found and marked recurrently in Shakespeare—between the seasons of man’s life and the seasons of the earth.

In Keats’s own account of the mid-September walk near Winchester after which he composed the ode, the defense of autumn’s chaste warmth over the more conventional beauties of the chilly, if erotic, spring, takes preeminence:

How beautiful the season is now—How fine the air. A temperate sharpness about it. Really, without joking, chaste weather—Dian skies—I never liked 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 Sunday’s walk that I composed upon it.

*Letters, ii, 167*

Keats must have remembered, in composing his ode, the closing lines of Frost at Midnight, lines which assert that to the soul not raised in the city but rather nurtured in nature the most adverse season is as beautiful as the most clement one:

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple tree, while the nigh thatch
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet moon.
Keats borrowed the redbreast, the mossy apple tree, the thatched roof, and the eaves from this poem, just as Coleridge himself had borrowed his eave-drops from *Il Penseroso*. *Il Penseroso*, like *Frost at Midnight*, claims that night, shade, storm, and rain are at least as beautiful, rightly considered, as the gayer charms of day and sunlight; indeed, for the reflective man, melancholy weather, or at least a shaded covert, is more beautiful than more conventionally lovely scenes. The debate about the proper response to a change (in the direction of shade or sharpness) in season or climate gives rise to the central question of Keats’s poem, and Keats’s response is the compensatory one he inherited from Milton, from Wordsworth (through the Intimations Ode), and from Coleridge:

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too.

Generically, then, the autumn ode belongs with poems which debate the value of melancholy, of suffering, or at least of a harsher change, poems which use as their central metaphor the realm of nature. Keats had entered this debate before, in the sonnets on the poetry of earth and the human seasons (*The poetry of earth is never dead* and *Four seasons fill the measure of the year*). There he had asserted the continuing presence of music in nature, as the winter “cricket on the hearth” (remembered from *Il Penseroso*) continues, almost exactly, the grasshopper’s summer music; and he had argued, through the seasonal metaphor, for mortality as a constitutive part of human nature: “[Man] has his winter too of pale misfeature, / Or else he would forget his mortal nature.” However, these theoretical justifications for winter, and the concurrent claim for the perpetuity of nature’s music, are based on the cyclicity of nature. There is something false in the metaphor: human life reaches, as seasons do not, an utmost verge; human music ends. In his sonnets Keats’s own fears prohibited both the deathly vision beyond the last gleaning and the reassuring cyclicity of the spring; the last vision allowed in *When I have fears* is that of a teeming field of ripening grain, or at most that of some partial harvest, of fields not yet entirely gleaned.

If it may be said, however glancingly, that the sonnet *When I have fears* is the first sketch for the harvest scenes of the autumn
ode; that the sonnet on the human seasons made the analogy of a natural autumn to a human autumn more explicit; that the sonnet on the poetry of earth gave rise, by its cricket, to the chorus of the creatures closing the ode; that *Frost at Midnight* offered some of the imagery (cottage, eaves, trees, and redbreast) for the first and third stanzas; and that *Il Penseroso*, the Intimations Ode, and *Frost at Midnight* were all in Keats's mind as he debated a compensatory value to set against the claims of spring, we are still missing several other poems that entered into the making of the ode, notably three of Shakespeare's sonnets (*That time of year, When I do count the clock*, and *How like a winter*), Milton's *Creation in Paradise Lost*, and Spenser's *Mutability Cantos*. *That time of year* postulates, in its first two quatrains, a villain ("the cold," "black night") responsible for the decay of nature; but it recovers, in its third quatrain, a sanity of view which declares that nature is itself its own consumer as it is its own nourisher; there is no villain, and the glowing fire of vital life is at the same time the fire of fatal extinction:

In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire  
As on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
As the death bed wheron it must expire  
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.

Keats will take this absolution of life to heart, making his Autumn the voluntary agent of her own dissolution in harvest; as she winnows, so is she winnowed, her hair, the tresses of wheat, soft-lifted by the winnowing wind. In thinking of possibilities for imagery of harvest, Keats would have recalled Shakespeare's lines from sonnet 12 which he had quoted (*Letters*, I, 188–189) as something not to be borne—the lines describing "summer's green all girded up in sheaves, / Borne on the bier" of the aged corn. Keats follows Shakespeare here in refusing a harvest thanksgiving, but declines to show the harvest as the decay of vegetation into a "white and bristly beard." In *How like a winter*, Keats found a poem central to his imagining of Autumn: Shakespeare's sonnet on an autumn of undeniable plenitude projects a bareness on the season, making it into an image of the bereaved mind pining for its absent lover:
How like a winter hath my absence been
From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year!
What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen!
What old December's bareness everywhere!
And yet this time removed was summer's time,
The teeming autumn big with rich increase,
Bearing the wanton burthen of the prime,
Like widowed wombs after their lords' decease;
Yet this abundant issue seemed to me
But hope of orphans and unfathered fruit;
For summer and his pleasures wait on thee,
And, thou away, the very birds are mute;
Or, if they sing, 'tis with so dull a cheer
That leaves look pale, dreading the winter's near.

From this sonnet come various Keatsian details: the "teeming autumn" yielded the "teeming brain" of When I have fears, which became the kernel of the autumn ode; the imagery of pregnancy and fruitfulness suggested the first stanza of the ode; the mention of three seasons in an autumn poem is repeated by Keats (but while Shakespeare moves back to summer and forward to winter, Keats moves back to summer and back further to spring, and suppresses the forward motion to winter); and, finally, Keats borrowed from Shakespeare the orphans and the diminished birdsong he used to close the ode.

The ode also depends on Milton, and on his Eve. She is a natural fertility goddess: Adam smiles on Eve "as Jupiter / On Juno smiles, when he impregnés the clouds, / That shed May flowers" (iv, 500–502). Keats's initial myth of the sun impregnating the earth, who conspires with him to set budding flowers, is mediated through Milton. In the book of Creation, even the devil's spears cannot escape being caught by the Miltonic net of fruition: they appear

As thick as when a field
Of Ceres ripe for harvest waving bends
Her bearded grove of ears, which way the wind
Sways them; the careful ploughman doubting stands,
Lest on the threshing-floor his hopeful sheaves
Prove chaff. (iv, 980–985, Keats's italics)
Milton's wind swaying the corn this way and that may have contributed something to the gnats rising and sinking on the variable wind. In Milton, agriculture stands for the natural work of man, as though to bend in rhythm with the seasons is part of man's essence. According to Milton, there are changes of ambience in Eden "for change delectable, not need," and to provide "grateful vicissitude" (v, 629; vi, 6). Though Milton speaks only of alternation of evening and morn, Keats seems to extend the idea of grateful vicissitude to seasonal change as well, as though we would be the poorer without it (a reflection continued by Wallace Stevens: "Does ripe fruit never fall?"). In Milton's Eden, Adam and Eve address, in their morning prayer, the morning "Mists and Exhalations" that rise "dusky or grey, / Till the sun paint your fleecy skirts with gold" (v, 185–186) — that sun is a near kin, we realize, to the painter-sun who, through the clouds, touches the stubble-plains with rosy hue, and makes them look warm. In Milton's Creation, Keats found his clustering vines and swelling gourd and tree branches hung with fruit:

Forth flourish'd thick the clustering vine, forth crept  
The swelling gourd . . .

Last  
Rose, as in dance, the stately trees, and spread  
Their branches hung with copious fruit.

(VII, 320–324)

As Eve gardens, she is to Milton like Ceres "yet virgin of Proserpina"; she must tend her garden after planting it, she says, because

What we by day  
Lop overgrown, or prune, or prop, or bind  
One night or two with wanton growth derides  
_Tending to wild._  

(ix, 209–212, Keats's italics)

In Eden what we see is nature tamed, not nature wild; agriculture and gardening, not indolence. Even after the Fall, Michael recommends temperance to Adam, so that his life may resemble in its span the ideal model of vegetative life, fruit gathered in due season:
So may thou live; till like ripe fruit thou drop
Into thy mother's lap; or be with ease
Gather'd, not harshly plucked; for death mature.

(XI, 535-537)

Keats chooses to take up not the first alternative—the ripe fruit dropping to the lap of earth—but rather the second, the fruit gathered with ease at its maturity. (His swallows were originally "gather'd," not "gathering.") Milton proposes his "natural" ends (of dropping or being gathered) after a long passage on diseases marked, like all the passages I have been quoting, by Keats in his copy of Paradise Lost. Moneta, we may say, incarnates postlapsarian fate as disease; Autumn incarnates it as a temperate and ripe harvest, once the progeny of the sun and the earth have become "for death mature." Otherwise, the sun itself would be useless and barren; only in the perishable fruits of the earth does the sun find its purpose:

The earth,
Though, in comparison of heaven, so small,
Not glistening, may of solid good contain
More plenty than the sun that barren shines
Whose virtue on itself works no effect,
But in the fruitful Earth; there first received
His beams, inactive else, their vigour find.

(viii, 91-97, Keats's italics)

Though there is agriculture in Eden, there is no fanciful alteration of nature: there are

Flowers worthy of Paradise which not nice Art
In beds and curious knots, but Nature boon
Pour'd forth profuse.

(iv, 241-243)

The landscape of Psyche, too, is influenced by Milton's Eden; but Keats had been unwilling, in his earlier ode, to do without the beds and curious knots of Fancy and "nice Art." In the ode To Autumn, however, there are no wreathed trellises; form arises from function and its incidental beauties alone. And yet there are resemblances between the gardener Fancy, in his creative power, and the season
Autumn, in hers; but Keats has decided that the untrammeled power to invent ever new flowers (and equivocal "bells" and "stars") with which he had endowed his gardener Fancy is really unnecessary: the earth is beautiful enough in itself. His season is like the Miltonic Fancy (a faculty conceived of as female), being faithful to the accuracy of the senses' perceiving:

Of all external things,
Which the five watchful senses represent,
She forms imaginations, airy shapes.
(v. 103-105)

All the imaginations and airy shapes of the ode To Autumn have arisen from the "external things" absorbed by Keats's five watchful senses, on the walk to St. Cross and all through his life. It is no accident that all five senses come into play in the ode: Keats deliberately crossed out the "white" kernel of the hazel shell in his draft and made it "sweet," so that the strenuous tongue, made peaceful here, should not lack its requiting. The spirit of Milton's Paradise so breathes over the autumn ode, and the figure of Milton's Eve in her solicitude for her fruits so melts into the figure of Keats's Autumn (who is part Spenserian season, part Eve, part Ceres) that we should not be surprised to find in Paradise Lost the aesthetic which gives Keats the confidence to trust that in a description of earth he may achieve a description of everything else:

Though what if Earth
Be but the shadow of Heaven, and things therein
Each to the other like, more than on Earth is thought?
(v. 575-577, Keats's italics)

The motto of the ode might be taken from another passage, not forgotten by Keats, on the creation of the birds. After God creates them,

Part loosely wing the region, part more wise
In common, ranged in figure wedge their way
Intelligent of seasons. (vii, 425-427)
Keats, like Milton’s birds and his own swallows, is “intelligent of seasons.” He imitates the birds’ wisdom in claiming some society; his final creatures sing their song in common: the isolation of the earlier odes (*Indolence, Psyche, Nightingale*) has been left behind. Finally, Keats’s autumn ode, like *The Fall of Hyperion*, derives centrally from Spenser’s Mutability Cantos. There, the terrible but beautiful Titaness who (because of the fall of her dynasty) is the classical symbol of change, presents, to Dame Nature and the assembled Olympians, a masque of seasons and months and hours. The months appear in the (comic) zodiacal order (from March through February); this is the cyclical order which brings all the universe into the “happy ending” of renewed vegetative fertility:

For all that from [Earth] springs, and is ybredde,
How-ever faire it flourish for a time,
Yet see we soone decay; and, being dead,
To turne again unto their earthly slime:
Yet, out of their decay and mortall crime,
We daily see new creatures to arize,
And of their winter spring another prime.

This passage is concerned solely with vegetative decay and regeneration. But Spenser decides to include in his cantos not only natural decay but violent corporeal death as well, first in the symbol of beasts massacred by men:

The beasts we daily see massacred dy
As thralls and vassals unto mens beheasts.

In the subsequent masque of seasons and months, Spenser turns from the cycle of vegetative decay and resurrection to the agricultural intervention in that cycle by man. Several of his personages appear with their appropriate agricultural implements: Autumn bears a sickle, March a spade, June plough-irons, July a scythe and sickle, September a knife-hook, October a ploughshare and coulter, January a pruning hatchet, and February a plough and pruning-tools. These implements harrow the ground and cut down its produce, aborting the natural cycle of decay and self-reseeding in
favor of the agricultural cycle of human planting, reaping, and gathering into garners. Keats's concentrated imagination reduces all the Spenserian agricultural masque-figures to one—the season Autumn—who is not, as in Spenser, a masculine figure, but rather a corn-goddess derived from pagan myth but filled with Spenserian reminiscence. Spenser's masculine Autumn appears

As though he joyed in his plentious store,
Laden with fruits . . .
Upon his head a wreath, that was enrold
With ears of corne of every sort, he bore;
And in his hand a sickle he did holde,
To reap the ripened fruits the which the earth had yold.
(italics mine)

Keats combines elements of this figure of Autumn with details taken from other masque-figures—Spring, with "flowres / That freshly budded and new blooms did beare"; March, who strews the earth with seed, "And fild her womb with fruitfull hope"; August, who leads "a lovely Mayd / Forth by the lilly hand, the which was crowd / With ears of corne, and full her hand was found" (Spenser identifies this virginal Proserpina-figure with Astraea). Keats deliberately suppresses aspects of Autumn that Spenser includes—September, "heavy laden with the spoyle / Of harvests riches," and October, drunken with the "must" or foam of the grape harvest's wine vats and with the oil of the olive harvest. In creating his paradoxical figure of Autumn, accessible to all, moving but still, Keats borrowed from Spenser's description of great Dame Nature herself:

Great Nature, ever young, yet full of eld;
Still moving, yet unmoved from her sted;
Unseen of any, yet of all beheld.

These eloquent mythical figures, presented by Spenser's copious syncretism in a form half-allegorical, half-mythological, are such a rich repository of conceptual mystery and emotional depth that Keats could have found no more comprehensive symbols on which to depend for the natural and classical impulses of his ode. (Its Christian impulses, as we shall see, are drawn from other sources.)
This long excursus on some of the poems that lie behind the ode is a digression in appearance only, since the claims that can be made for the ode depend intimately on the weight of meaning its words are made to bear; the proximate contexts of the ode create the meaning the words have in the poem. I will return to the question of language in the ode at the close of this chapter; but it is time now to turn to the ode itself, to establish, first of all, its various structural movements, often described in general terms, but not looked at closely enough, I think, by previous commentators. This ode, unlike its predecessors, exhibits several great organizing motions at once, engaged in mute interplay.

The first great motion is the temporal one. We see as the poem opens the ripening fruits of the earth; next (in a flashback) the flowers that preceded them; and then the proto-harvest of nectar from the flowers, accomplished by the bees, the first harvesters. In the second stanza we view the second harvest of grain and fruit (the cider-making is the result of the fruit harvest); and finally in the third stanza we come to the stubble-plains. From budding flowers to denuded fields we go in one motion, but with incidental oddities to which we shall return.

The second great organizing motion of the ode occurs in space. The poem rises in a wide haze of mists and maturing sun, an overview or panorama not to be returned to until the final stanza of the ode. Within the body of the ode, there is a remarkably meticulous topography, beginning with the human dwelling, the thatched cottage and the grape vines encircling its eaves—the first and closest of many concentric plottings of space. Beyond the cottage we pass to the apple orchard, the kitchen garden with its gourds and nut tree, and the beehives (commonly under the cottage-trees)—all the immediate surroundings of the central house. In the next stanza we go “abroad”—to the outbuildings, the granary, the threshing floor, the building housing the cider press, and to the cornfields full of wheat and poppies. We also learn that the gleaner must cross a brook to get from cornfield to granary. (Keats was by this time intensely conscious, as his notes to Paradise Lost show, of the gains to be won by careful “stationing” of all details.) In the third stanza we see or conjecture spaces farther afield. We may look to the horizon where we
see barred clouds, and we may reach in thought beyond the stubble-plains (and their incorporated tributary brook) to the river (one natural boundary of the farm), to the hilly bourn of sheep pasturage (another natural boundary), to the hedgerows (planted where river or hill did not separate one farm from another), and finally to a croft (perhaps a far corner of the farm). In the last line, after this careful situating of the perimeter on a plane, the space of the poem becomes three dimensional, and, in a sudden expansion of direction, we lift our eyes up to the skies, the upper “boundary” of the farm.

Besides the temporal passage from flowering and fruition to cider-making and stubble-plains, besides the spatial expansion of perspective from the central thatched cottage to the perimeter of the farm and its upper bounding by the sky, the poem seems to sketch, though lightly, a passage through a season-spanning day—from the mists of dawn, through the noon heat in which the reaper drowses, to a sunset.

There is also a movement in field of imagery. Though descriptions of what sort of imagery animates the first two stanzas have differed (with emphasis given to kinesthetic imagery in the first, and visual imagery in the second), everyone agrees that in the last stanza it is the ear, rather than the eye, which is the chief receptive agent.

Finally, and most interestingly, it has always been noticed that the figure of Autumn, shadowy at best in the first and third stanzas, rises to a visible presence in the second stanza. This rising and subsequent effacement, probably the most beautiful motion of the poem, has inevitably asked for explanation.

The orchestration of these five large effects—the successive seasonal blooming and harvesting over time, the spatial expansion from cottage to horizon, the sequence of the single prototypical day, the change in field of imagery, and the disappearance of the personified figure of the season—is itself accomplished with remarkably little strain and with no announcement. Imperceptibly the poem moves on in seasonal time, earthly space, diurnal progress, imagery, and “population”—for if the second stanza is “inhabited” by the allegorical figure, the first is equally “inhabited” by fruits and the third by creatures, to speak in approximations. Within each of these large movements, there are puzzling submotions, which must
be noticed before any "reading" of the ode is possible. In one sense, almost nothing I have so far said is "true," if by true we mean ade­quate to the lines of the poem. I have said, for instance, that we see as the poem opens the ripening fruits of the earth—roughly true if we think of what the first stanza of the poem chooses to display most amply. But as the poem opens we "see" first a goddess and a god (as I will soon recount); and yet this is not strictly true, because the speaker enters rather into the intent of the Season, and we are made privy not only to her relation with her Miltonic paramour the sun but also to her conspiring, which remains, as Geoffrey Hartman has made us see, in the realm of what he calls surmise rather than accomplishment. In yet another sense we see nothing; the position of the reader vis-à-vis this poem is a strange one. The poet is so unconscious of his reader that we have only the choice of becoming him in his apostrophe and losing our own identity. There is no so­cial dimension to this voice, none of the comfortable assumption of a shared social language after the manner of Thomson, nothing of the communal language of Latin invocation. If we see at all, it is through the eyes of Keats that we see, not through our own. The colloquy with Autumn is so close that when the poet says to her, "Think not of them," there is no society but himself and his goddess present. It was from this poem that Stevens learned of the existence of the interior paramour, in the intensest rendezvous, "within its vital boundary, in the mind." Keats, like Stevens, has made "a dwelling in the evening air, / In which being there together is enough." The public diction of the Ode to Psyche belied that poem's claim that it was sung only into the goddess's own soft-conched ear. But the autumn ode is private, and flows between poet and Season, and we are absorbed into the flow.

I return, then, to my approximations, each of them provisional, as one aspect of the ode at a time is held to the light. As I have said, in each of the five great motions of the ode, all simultaneous, there are puzzling submotions. In the first stanza, the puzzling anomaly is the chronologically late appearance of the proto-harvest from the flowers, undertaken by the bees. In this earliest of harvests, the harvest of nectar, the landscape remains undespoiled: the bees do not pluck the flowers but rather extract from them the nectar which in
the form of honey is stored in the bees' granaries, the "clammy cells" of their hives.\(^9\) This is an Edenic harvest, a harvest belonging to summer. Not only is there no visible damage to the landscape, but rather, in the manner proper to paradisal fruitfulness, the earth continues to produce of its own volition more and more offerings. The bees, our surrogates, live in a prelapsarian dream, thinking that "warm days will never cease." (We may notice in passing that the birds of the earthly paradise, who sing their spring songs of true love, are missing in Keats's adaptation of the paradisal topos in the first stanza, but are later remembered in the backward glance to the "songs of spring.") In the appearance, out of sequence (since it arrives after the appearance of fruit), of the flower harvest, we can see the undertow of nostalgia at work in the ode, an undertow which, while the ode moves steadily forward in time, itself moves in reverse, till it brings us to the Shakespearean backward glance to the sweet birds of spring at the beginning of the last stanza, and to the equal backward glance to spring lambs in speaking of the autumnal full-grown sheep; it also summons up the rosy bloom of the close. For the moment, we can leave this countercurrent of nostalgic reversal of time remarked, and pass on.

A competing submotion in the first stanza, however, reveals why it is necessary that the bees and their harvest of overbrimming cells be placed last. Many of Keats's verbs representing the actions of autumn are verbs having, if allowed to progress, a natural terminus: loading ends in overloading, bending ends in breaking, filling ends in overflowing, swelling ends in bursting, plumping ends in splitting.\(^{10}\) If the fruits of the earth are not harvested when they are ripe, natural process dictates a continuing into overripeness, bursting of skin, rottenness, and death. More than one poet has let the first stanza of Keats's ode continue uninterrupted in his imagination—has let the apples fall from the trees "and bruise themselves an exit from themselves" (Lawrence), or has let the gourds swell to streaking and bursting:

Our bloom is gone. We are the fruit thereof.
Two golden gourds distended on our vines,
Into the autumn weather, splashed with frost,
Distorted by hale fatness, turned grotesque.
We hang like warty squashes, streaked and rayed,
The laughing sky will see the two of us
Washed into rinds by rotting winter rains.

(Stevens, Le Monocle de Mon Oncle)

In deciding to make his ode not a poem about nature alone but rather a poem about all that happens in a given season, emphasizing intervention (by bees, human beings, and a goddess) in natural processes, Keats has to warn us of the road he chooses not to take—of those termini which nature, left to herself, would attain. Strained as we are by his verbs of loading, bending, filling, swelling, and plumping, we need to be relieved by one action brought to its natural end, and Keats gives it to us: summer has “o’er-brimm’d” the honeycombs. The cup that runs over is not only a hallowed image of harvest, but also the only agreeable choice among the termini. One long trajectory of ripening, then, comes to an end in the bursting of bounds symbolized by the overflowing honey; the other trajectories (of fruits and vegetables) are not allowed their natural termini, however, because their growth is interrupted by the harvest of full-ripened apples, grapes, nuts, and gourds. There is no seed here left to fall back to the ground (another road not taken, but one which occurred to Keats in the letter where he lies awake “listening to the Rain with a sense of being drown’d and rotted like a grain of wheat”—Letters, 1, 273). There is no implication in the ode of a cyclical process which would, left to its own devices, produce the fruits of a following spring. There is no fruit which falls to the earth and dies. Not natural process alone, but the interaction of natural process and human harvest, is the central topic of the poem, linking it to the georgic tradition.

It is time to glance at the opening of the first stanza, where the mythological framework of the poem is introduced. The myth invoked, inherited directly from Paradise Lost but indirectly from classical mythology, is that of the sky-god impregnating the earth so that she may bear fruit. Heaven and earth embrace, “and forth the particulars of rapture come,” in Stevens’ words. But in Keats’s version, the sky-god is Apollo the sun, the earth-goddess is Autumn, and their mutual relation is euphemized as one between “bosom-
friends.” She, all mists and mellow fruitfulness, and he, the matur­ing agent, conspire together, he breathing warmth, she moisture. In this allowing of the “lower sense” of sexuality into his poem, Keats gives full credence to the sexual origins of all “teem­ings”—those of art as well as those of nature—and permits, at least in the natural and mythological order, a “peaceable and healthy spirit” to replace the hectic sexuality of La Belle Dame sans Merci and the Ode on Melancholy.

After the brief allusion to the sun, Keats removes him from the landscape. In view of Keats’s almost inevitable association of Apollo with sun and harvest, the disappearance needs explaining. Earlier, Apollo had cried to the Graces, “[Who] will ride with me / Across the gold autumn’s whole kingdoms of corn?” (Apollo to the Graces), and we might have expected him to ride with the Season through the poem. But here he disappears. In spite of the fact that the activi­ties of the stanza are logically governed by the verb phrase “conspir­ing with him how to,” the activities seem in fact to be those of the Season alone as, once impregnated, she brings forth fruits. (Though the form may be that of surmise, the impression is one of steady action.) Keats is certainly influenced, in leaving Autumn alone in her work, by Eve’s gardening; but he is also remembering, I think, Shakespeare’s image of Autumn as pregnant but widowed—“The teeming autumn big with rich increase, / Bearing the wanton burthen of the prime, / Like widowed wombs after their lords’ decease.” But in Shakespeare this invention—the decease of the impregnating lord—is a back-forQ1ation from the young man’s absence: the virtual disappearance of the sun in Keats must find another explanation. The sun’s participation in the action of the first stanza seems to extend chiefly to blessing, as the first verbs after the conspiring of season and sun are a pair combining practical and spiritual activity—“load and bless”—whereas after this pair the verbs occur singly and are only practical ones, as the Season goes about her work of bending, filling, and so on. We are perhaps justi­fied, then, in seeing the “blessing” as the work of the sun who, having bestowed his sexual blessing (else he would “barren shine”), can withdraw his active presence. Keats was tempted to reinsert the sun in the second stanza, but bravely resisted, striking out a beauti­ful line (“While bright the Sun slants through the husky barn”) in
order to keep Apollo occluded. And even at the end, to which I will recur, the sun remains hidden, though active, behind the barred clouds.

Some of the pathos of the ode arises, in fact, from the unaccompanied nature of the divine Season as she appears in the second stanza (there are no other reapers in the field, no threshers in the barn), though that pathos is not fully evident until the vigil at the cider press. And yet she is not, in one sense, alone: she is generously present, like Spenser’s Dame Nature, to all beholders. Seek and ye shall find, says Keats in a Christian echo. It is not a question, as Hartman reminds us, of the remote goddess who is seen briefly if at all; “Who hath not seen thee” is the more proper question here than who has, and the proper remark about her accessibility is “Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find / Thee.” Autumn is lonely only in her difference from her company of votaries; hers is an ontological, not a social, loneliness. In the second stanza she is no longer the active and purposeful creator that she had been at first glimpse; now she is seen, framed in the habitual present tense, as a harvester, disposed in any number of characteristic stationings in the landscape.

The second stanza is divided like the first (with its fruits and bees) into two unequal portions, the first concerned with the grain harvest, the second with the fruit harvest. We recognize the underlying convention of the two autumn harvests, normally resulting in bread and wine, but we must explain (especially since grapes on vines are present in the first stanza) the choice of apple juice (we see it newly pressed, as yet unfermented into cider) rather than wine as the liquor of this ode. (Though England is not a wine-making country, the ode could easily accommodate wine in its unspecified geography.) We recall of course Keats’s characteristic sobriety, inherited from Milton’s L’Allegro, which refuses Venus and Bacchus as progenitors of mirth; in Keats this becomes the refusal of “Bacchus and his pards.” It is inconceivable that the autumn ode, which originated in Keats’s praise of temperate air and Dian skies, could admit wine and intoxication to its harvest scene—though we see the return of the repressed in the fume of poppies, a phrase also allowing the “lower sense” of smell to appear in the poem.

We must still inquire why the harvest scenes take the form they
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do, a question that has been frequently put. We see in this poem a thresher who does not thresh, a reaper who does not reap, a gleaner who does not glean, a cider-maker who does not turn her press. Though determined on his agricultural harvest, rather than on natural process, Keats forbears to show us the Season undoing her own activities of fruition. Instead, he shows her insensibly matured and then depleted through the harvest. She sits careless first, like a girl caressed by the wind; next, she is seen drowsy, fulfilled, in a maturer sensuality, in an involuntary intoxication from poppies (Keats replaces his habitual cultic incense with a nonreligious word as he chooses “fume,” at once recalling the smoke of incense, the vapors of wine, and the perfume of flowers); third, she takes care in the bearing of a gleaned burden on her laden head; and last, she sits patient in a long vigil, watching “the last oozings hours by hours.” In this stanza, the flowers of the proto-harvest appear again, inextricably twined with the grain in an image of total sexual maturity, masculine and feminine. Autumn acquiesces in but does not enact her own dissolution. Her tresses are the winnowed grain, her life-blood the last oozings. But these intimations of a staying-of-harvest do not explain Keats’s rearrangement of the normal order of the grain harvest. Where we would expect (in this minutely conscious poem) first reaping, then gleaning, then threshing, we find instead first threshing, then reaping, then gleaning, a sequence invented, I believe, to show the difficulties of presenting an inactive harvest, and one imbued with pathos. Though the archetypal image of harvest is that of reaping, the most energetic single harvest image is that of threshing: when “the stars shall be threshed, and the souls threshed from their husks,” then, as Yeats and Blake knew, would come the trampling out of the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. Keats wishes to avoid any appearance of apocalypse, and so the season, far from herself wielding the flail, becomes in the threshing scene entirely passive, and is herself, in her metamorphosis into grain, “winnowed” by the soft wind. Gleaning must occur last in the series of scenes from the grain-harvest because it is by definition the most pathetic of harvest-phases, associated as it is in Keats’s mind with the image of Ruth, in tears amid the alien corn. And yet,
refusing to succumb to the pathos inherent in the image of gleaning (present by indirectness in old age's "few, sad, last gray hairs" or Shakespeare's "yellow leaves, or few, or none"), Keats permits himself to show the gleaner only as a careful tributary presence on her way to the granary, a presence steady and skillful, not homesick and estranged. In the arrested motion of this stanza, the thresher sits, the reaper drowses, the gleaner balances her laden head, and the cider-maker watches in vigil. Spenserian "store" yields gradually to store undone: the soft-lifted hair of the intact wheat gives way to the half-reaped furrow of poppies and corn, which in turn is replaced, imaginatively, by the cut spears borne in the basket (no bier) burdening the gleaner, and all disappear in favor of the crushed and no longer recognizable apples, obliterated into drops of essence.

At this progressive diminution and extirpation, the mind rebels, and yields powerfully to its nostalgia for its springtime. The natural question for it to voice in its yearning, given the imagery of fruits and flowers hitherto marking the season, would be "Where are the flowers of spring?" ("The simple flowers of our spring," as Keats called them two weeks after his first hemorrhage—Letters, ii, 260). The apparent illogicality of "Where are the songs of spring?" can be explained on various grounds—Keats's recollection of Shakespeare's autumnal tree with its ruined choirs, his association of the gleaner with Ruth and the nightingale, and his intent to end the poem with music. These all summon up the backward glance to the songs of spring, those birdsongs of love (his own song of the nightingale among them) not mentioned in the first stanza of the ode, though belonging by decorum to any picture of the earthly paradise. In the antiphonal exchange of question-and-echo which opens the last stanza, the season herself seems to be revoicing the question of her poet: he asks "Where are the songs of spring?" and "Ay, where are they?" she sighs back (if only in his conjecture—a conjecture we do not see until his reply to her, "Think not of them, thou hast thy music too," since until that reply he might be thought to be engaged only in a rewording of his own question, a dialogue of the mind with itself). In the fiction of the poem, the poet is touched by the Season's grief, which he has, by his question, unwittingly caused; he bends to reassure her and comfort her lack, rather than his own:
"Thou hast thy music too." In this, the central debate-exchange of the ode, the poem becomes most self-reflexive (and therefore, as Bridges saw, comes close, given its presentational aesthetic, to unsettling its poise). I shall return to the ode's meditation on itself. But here, we must pass to the main intent of this closing stanza which, like the two preceding it, is divided into two apparent parts (but with the briefer preceding, rather than following, the longer part, a reversal of proportion which is itself a chiastic closure). As we saw the fruits chiefly in the first stanza (but with a brief final glimpse of the bees and the later flowers), and as we saw the corn harvest chiefly in the second stanza (but with a brief final tableau of the cider harvest), so here we focus chiefly on the music of the creatures (but with some brief initial attention to the landscape).

The landscape initiates the grand syntactic balance of this stanza: "While this, then that, and now the other." The landscape is presented in terms of agent and effect: the "barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day, / And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue." But of course the barred clouds are not the actual agent of this rosy light: it is the setting sun, obscured by the level clouds on the horizon, who is the real agent; and the "bloom" of the sun's present work echoes, phonetically, the "bless" of his earlier appearance at the opening of the poem. The sun, creator of life, can at this moment no longer work his maturing inward power; now he can be only a painter, capable simply of external effect, setting a bloom on the day to make the stubble-plains look warm as some pictures look warm—Keats borrowing from his letter on the autumn walk the image of the sun as painter (using a "rosy hue" from his palette). Keats rejected the impulse to borrow from Shakespeare and Chatterton: his earlier alternative, "While a gold cloud gilds the soft-dying day," though preserving the aura of Apollo—"once more the golden theme"—was at once too derivative, too artificial, and too chilly. In his decline, the sun keeps the same mystery he presented at his most powerful; veiled by mists at the beginning, by cloud at the end, he remains faintly removed from the visible landscape, though intrinsic to its early fruitfulness and to the late, if external, bloom on its dying countenance.

During this brief moment, while the sun's transient color warms
the stubble-fields, gnats, lambs, and crickets utter their sounds; in the appended period, introduced by the inceptive "and now," the whistle of the red-breast and the twitter of swallows conclude the poem. In this stanza of the creatures, the most discreet and yet most constitutive element is the unmoving center from which all is seen and heard. The listener, who had admired the universal motions of Autumn's intent in the first stanza, and who had sought abroad to find her in her various manifestations in the second stanza, here stands rooted to one spot, noting the directions from which the sounds of his small society come to him. He hears the gnats mourning among the river sallows, the lambs bleating from hilly bourn, the red-breast whistling from a croft, and swallows twittering in the skies. The listener does not himself wander from river to hill to hedge to croft; rather, the sounds converge toward him, creating a centripetal submotion opposing the powerful centrifugal motion of the stanza as it goes about its work of establishing the outlying boundaries—river, hill, hedge, and croft—of the farm.

In the description of the creatures, Keats engages in a testing of his own feelings toward his social closing scene. At first, in the passage on the gnats, all is pure pathos: the "small" gnats, those ephemeral insects, are assembled in a "wailful" choir, singing an infantine dirge as they "mourn"; in their helplessness they are wholly in the erratic power of the air, "borne aloft / Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies." The next passage, too, yields to pathos, as sheep are represented as "full-grown lambs" (the equivalent of calling human beings in some context "full-grown infants"). The so-called lambs have a verb resembling their title: in a construction which is parallel, in its rapid diminution, to "full-grown lambs," they are said to "loud bleat"; and since we associate bleating, when predicated of lambs, with the young seeking their mothers, this is rather like calling human speech "loud babble." The modifiers ("full-grown" and "loud") raise to "adult" status the central noun and verb ("lambs . . . bleat") which nonetheless are the essential descriptive words of the kernel-sentence, and retain their infantile connotations.

However, after these two tender-hearted descriptions, of the gnats and the lambs, Keats pulls himself up short with an enormous
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effort of will, refusing pathos. (In fact the effort toward stoicism had begun with the invention of the lambs, as I hope to show, but tonally the presence of the lambs is clothed in pathos.) In a chastened realization that music, even if not that of the nightingale, is nonetheless music, Keats announces that crickets—plain hedge-cricketcs, unmodified by adjective or adverb of pathos—“sing.” It is a verb wholly unlike “mourn” or “bleat,” and is of course for Keats the perfected verb of music. After this stiffening of courage and bestowal of the honorific word “sing,” retrospect ends, and the speaker and his utterance converge in the present: “and now” red-breast and swallow join the choir. The verbs at the end are neither pathetic nor honorific, but instead acoustically exact: the red-breast whistles, the swallows twitter. However, to banish pathos entirely is as untrue as to yield to it utterly, and so the modifiers of these two admirably neutral verbs are allowed some fleeting measure (introduced more by reader than by writer) of pathos. The red-breast is said to whistle “with treble soft,” and though this can be taken simply as a musical notation, still the context urges us to associate the modifier (as in the phrase “childish treble”) with that soft high voice we associate with child singers; and the swallows (in the most gently touched of these phrases) are “gathering” in a mutual cluster—whether for their night-wheeling or for migration is deliberately left unspecified, but the steady onward progress of the season in the poem urges us to think of winter.

If, now, having rapidly glanced at the sources of the ode, and at its chief motions and submotions, we attempt to arrive at a thematic reading of the whole, we must pass to more spacious questions of sequence, disposition, myth, tone, and logic. Since I see no reason to ignore information when we possess it, I would begin with the originating image of the entire poem, the stubble-plains. The whole poem, to my mind, is uttered from the stubble-plains; and its tones, even of greatest celebration, are, I think, intelligible only when they are heard as notes issuing from deprivation. It would seem that in spite of his somewhat forced approval of the stubble-fields, as it is voiced in his letter (“Aye better than the chilly green of the
spring”). Keats’s first imaginative act, on seeing the bare plains, was a reparatory one, comparable to the act which prompted the Ode to Psyche. He wished to fill up the empty canvas of the landscape, to replenish its denuded volume, to repopulate its boundaries. And so, like his own Autumn, he begins to “load” the empty autumn space with a thatched cottage, grapevines, an apple orchard, a kitchen garden, a nut tree, bee hives, and flowering meadows. The Miltonic espousal of Earth and Sun fills the scene, too, with a benevolent pair, even if they are felt rather than seen. This reparatory effort is a literal evisceration of self. The autumn bounty that pours onto the page represents a fantasy of recreating the depleted landscape out of one’s own rebellious conspiring against death.

If Keats cannot, in restitutive fantasy, resurrect “the teeming autumn, big with rich increase,” his imagination will, in a second attempt, rise to another response in an effort to deny the obdurate blankness of the stubble-plains from which the spirit of the corn has fled. The fantasy embodied in the second stanza of the ode is a providential one: a figure of care, enhancement, and concern will be made to hover in the landscape, even if the fruits of the earth prove fugitive. (The “Dian skies” of the letter perhaps awakened the wish to incorporate a goddess into the panorama, and, as we know from the sonnet To Homer, Keats thought of Diana as triple Hecate, “Queen of Earth, and Heaven, and Hell,” a goddess possessed of that triple sight that Homer possessed and that every poet desires to find on the shores of darkness. The female goddess of the second stanza also brings to mind, as I have said, Spenser’s Nature and Milton’s Eve; and Ceres, Pomona, and Proserpina seem also present in Keats’s imagination.) The girl sitting careless on a granary floor or asleep amid the poppies is like Proserpina before her abduction (Milton’s Eve-Proserpina is “herself a gathered flower”); the more burdened and careworn figures of the gleaner and the watcher by the cider-press resemble the sadder figure of Ceres after Proserpina’s disappearance. Whatever the exact correspondence, this shape-changing female figure in the landscape bears unmistakable resemblances to classical goddesses. On the other hand, goddesses do not reap furrows or carry burdens or press apples; and in spite of the arrested motion here, it is certainly the figure in the landscape
who has reaped the half-furrow, and it is her hook, as she sleeps, that spares the next swath. At most, goddesses of the harvest hold a symbolic scythe, or bear, motionless, a basket-cornucopia; they do not do work, or sleep in the midst of work, or walk with laden head. This female in the landscape is, then, closer in her actions to Milton's Eve, as I have said earlier. But Eve only gardens and gathers; she is never pictured as one reaping, with the power to spare or end the life of the corn (lopping and pruning enhance the life of the plant, they do not end it), nor is she pictured as changing the substance of any of her gathered plenty by force (as the cider-press crushes the apples). Keats's female in the landscape is Spenserian and postlapsarian—a human figure who also looks divine, or a divine figure who has taken on the labor and mortality of the human.

If Keats's poem is not about natural process left to itself but about human harvest interrupting that process, we touch, in the appearance of this figure, Keats's most intimate conviction that nature herself would assent, if with reluctance, to the harvesting of her beauties and her amplitudes, rather than see their abandonment to the wind and the weather and their natural fate. But her will to harvest meets her knowledge, expressed in the scene in the granary, that it is she herself who is winnowed; and so her scythe stops in mid-motion. By awakening his figure; by returning her, laden, across the brook; by stationing her, in her own passion, next to the last drops of harvest pressing, Keats makes her the participant in, and witness to, her own willed death. Her life—her swaths of corn, her apples—is, by her own action, transubstantiated into that "store" which, in the altered and "essential" form of grain and cider, will fill her granaries and urns. But in the process the original form has disappeared—there are no more plains of wheat and poppies, only an expanse of stubble. The goddess's form has vanished; the transubstantiation is complete. The poppies, untransubstantiated, are the sacrifice absolute.

In what is the most ascetic choice of the poet, there is no view of the usual conceptual harvest-counterpoise—those "rich garners" full of grain. Even La Belle Dame sans Merci had allowed them: "The squirrel's granary is full, / And the harvest's done"; it is the one
plenitude in the birds’ silence and withered sedge. At the end of harvest, two generic motions offer themselves to the harvest-poet. One is the harvest celebration—the hock-cart, the bringing in of the sheaves, songs of thanks, a banquet, and intoxication from the vintage. The other is the cyclical return to spring, always (in the human case) magical, since it contravene death: “Spring come to you at the farthest / In the very end of harvest.” There are no stubble-plains in The Tempest. But Keats will not invoke either a banquet-celebration or a resurrective Spenserian Garden of Adonis. He will write a different kind of post-harvest coda. The loss of the female figure from the landscape precludes any ritual celebration of the ingathered harvest. When she is gone, there is nothing left remarkable—or so he first feels. The eyes see only a nachtschein, external, on the soft-dying day; there seems no inner vitality in the landscape as the eyes take in the scene.

Keats’s two initial reparatory motions of replenishing the landscape, whether with fruit or with figure, have exhausted themselves—the one in the o’er-brimming of the clammy cells (a prototypical image of “rich garners,” but deliberately not a beautiful one, else it would subvert the intent not to celebrate “store”), the other in the vigil over the oozings of the cider-press, which drained his season’s life-blood. His third effort, at this point in the poem, since he will refuse both conventional harvest rejoicing and magical vernal return, must be to find something to write about in the bare landscape from which he has now twice averted his eyes—that landscape left after flowers, corn, fruit, and the vegetation goddess who was their spiritual embodiment have all been cut down, threshed to grain, and pressed to oozings. Or, to put it more exactly, it is the landscape left after the vegetation goddess has, by self-immolation, transubstantiated her earlier growing forms into essential “store,” insofar as that is possible: those that cannot be transubstantiated are forever, like the poppies, lost. It is not fanciful, I think, to see in this transubstantiation and loss by self-immolation Keats’s parable of the work of the poet. The store of poetry is not similar in any visible way to its source in growing life; and not all of growing life can be transubstantiated into the kernel and juice of the preserved “store.” Untransmuted, life drops back into the earth and into the endless
biological cycle. Jesus' parable recommends that the grain of wheat die into the earth; Keats's parable recommends that it be taken away from nature and transmuted into "store." And yet Keats claims for his transubstantiation-by-execution (what else are the scythe and cider-press but machines of painful execution?) a result—not earthly bread and wine in garner, still less sacramental wafer and cup, but a further transubstantiation, the subject of his last stanza.

The desolation of the visible scene, once the female sculptural figure vanishes, is the desolation of the little town robbed by the urn of its inhabitants; 'the absence at the heart of things brings us again into the shrine of Melancholy in the very temple of Delight. The goddess has dwindled in direct proportion to the stored harvest, as the grapes, so to speak, have burst or as the apple juice has oozed. Motive has been transformed into product, energy into essence, life into art. The consolation following on the synecdoche "Where are the songs of spring?" must of course itself be musical, but by his deliberate invoking of gnats (small and wailful and helpless in the wind, however light), and by his infantilizing of sheep (as bleating lambs), as well as by his attributing a "treble soft" to the red-breast, Keats suggests that the post-sacrificial autumn music issues from a choir of orphans. Earlier, in *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, he had said that in desolation no birds sing, an exaggeration he had shared with Shakespeare, whose sonnet (and whose recantation of the exaggeration) he now recalls, using its constellation of orphans and diminished birdsong:

Yet this abundant issue seem'd to me
But hope of Orphans, and un-fathered fruit,
For Summer and his pleasures wait on thee,
And thou away, the very birds are mute.
Or if they sing, 'tis with so dull a cheer,
That leaves look pale, dreading the Winter's near.

If Keats's creatures in the last stanza are orphans, they are in mourning for a dead mother. The figurative clinging together of the orphan choir, as they converge in centripetal sound toward the listener, suggests their precariousness and insecurity. "We were
left,” says Wordsworth of himself and his orphaned siblings, “trooping together as we might.” If we follow one drift of the poem, we hear in Keats’s final lines the weak voices of orphaned children, blown helplessly by the winds of circumstance, but yet, “spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth,” uttering their soft sounds of life over the soft-dying day. If we follow another drift of the poem, the more neutral one refusing pathos, we hear the music of the season’s choir.

If we pause, now, to ask the largest thematic questions, those prompted by the totality of the ode, and answerable only insofar as we can combine into one perspective the manifold offered by the poem, we are inevitably drawn into some comparisons. In many of his poems, Keats is prompted to responses other than the ones he here adopts when he discovers an absence at the center of the world. La Belle Dame sans Merci entertains the void; Keats feels no stir of any compensatory energies, since he has been, in the person of the knight-at-arms, helplessly enthralled and disenthralled, and his own will, in his self-doubling as narrator, is powerless in the outcome.20 In the Ode to Psyche, to turn to the opposite extreme, he engages energetically in a reparatory mimetic fiction, and ends his poem once the point-for-point reparatory shrine is constructed, though he can fill its center only prospectively, hoping that Psyche will come to the bower and that its casement, open wide, will let the warm Love in. In Nightingale, art can temporarily fill the void with the intense paralleled song in the artist and reverie in the audience, but is rudely insufficient as a permanent device to fill the vacuum of passing life. The Urn for the first time acquiesces in the deathliness of art by admitting that the folk on the urn can neither leave the urn (as they can do in Indolence) nor return to the town. But that ode requires that the livingness and deathliness of art be seen alternatively rather than simultaneously: nothing in its fiction escapes its propositional duality of Yes/No, Alive/Dead, nor its conceptual duality of Beauty and Truth.

The ode To Autumn begins, like Psyche, in a mimetic reparatory effort; unlike Psyche it does not first articulate the lack toward which the reparation is directed, but conceals those originating stubble-plains in their function as origin until the last stanza. The
fact that they are the origin, however, explains the peculiar non-
narration of the first two stanzas, which makes the first a "surmise"
in Hartman's sense, and the second a recounting of a habitual mode.
The only "now" is the "now" of the song over the stubble-fields. Nonetheless, we recognize in the figure of Autumn in the first stanza a lineal descendant of Fancy in the *Ode to Psyche*; each touches creation into bloom, each is the imagination-as-repairer of actual lack.

But *Autumn*, once its reparatory efforts at vegetative and providential plenitude are abandoned, subsides at first into an attempt at balance. While the nostalgic note of rosy bloom over the land is sounded, *sostenuto*, in the syntax, the creatures are allowed, in sound, their independent possession of the air. Had the memorial gleam been allowed to remain fixed on the fields for the entire duration of the last stanza—had the syntactic frame, that is, been simply "While this, then that"—we might say that the sense of loss which had stimulated the energies of the imagination had remained unobliterated, for all the poet's best efforts at presentational objectivity. But such is not the case. In the last moment of the ode, both loss and its compensatory projections (whether in ripening fruit, in peopled landscape, or in rosy bloom) are forgotten in an annihilation of subjectivity and a pure immersion in the actual:

> And now with treble soft
> The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
> And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

These sounds are detached, syntactically, from the sunset warmth bathing the earlier orphaned songs. The glance that rises to the skies in the last line (the swallows twitter "in," not "from," the skies) has lifted itself away from the panorama of the land and its missing riches, and is purged of self-referential pathos and nostalgia for the past. The ode has floated free of its occasion, and ends poised in the sound of song, sufficient unto itself.

The restorative hopes of the first two stanzas have been abandoned. The extraordinary mimetic power of poetic description, its gift of *trompe l'oeil*, however consoling a fiction, is a fiction
nonetheless. A poem, Keats realizes, is not a "picture"; it cannot "reproduce" either the stubble-fields it contemplates or the richer produce of an earlier season; it is no urn, no frieze. And a poem is not a conjuration; it cannot reincarnate an unravished bride, a neglected heathen goddess, a dead mother, or a Ceres hypostasized from the life of the fertile earth. A completed poem—so Keats seems to be insisting in leaving his pictures and his figures behind and in choosing sound (recalling the abstract art of Nightingale) as his last resort—is nothing but a thin thread of sound, rising and falling in obedience to its governing rhythms. Though it possesses, seemingly, all the expressive power of human speech, the music of poetry is in fact not ordinary speech but rather sound lifted and sinking as the metrical law governing it rises and falls. Faced with the stubble-plains, the poet can only, after his first denials of deprivation in his radiant illusionist effects, subside into his own oscillatory utterance. It is an utterance that can expand or contract, as the need arises—shrinking, in its smallest dimension, to the briefest of notations in phrases like "to swell the gourd" or "hedge-cricket sings," and swelling, in its widest expansion, to the small incorporated narratives of the bees, the sleeping reaper, and the choir of gnats. It is for this reason that Keats's "perfected" word for poetic utterance, for which he has been seeking throughout the last stanza (trying, in sequence, "songs," "music," "wail," "mourn," "bleat," "sing," and "whistle"—and even, perhaps, "touch" and "bloom"), is "twitter," a verb which preserves the association of a neutral fluttering sound, rising and falling, though within the smallest of gamuts.

We find, I think, an ampler solace than that offered by reparatory and mimetic fictions in this return, by Keats, to the human norm, a return in which expansive imaginative gestures of replenishment are stilled in favor of the sobriety of the actual. Still, the poem as a whole has other dimensions besides this self-reflexive one which has affirmed that a poet has no recourse—in the face of all he knows of creation, flowering, and fruition, of disappearance, denudation, transmutation, and extinction—except to utter a tenuous and rhythmic rising and sinking of sound.

In mythological terms, the poem retells the story of the fertility
and death of the mother, which, otherwise considered, is the story of the origins and growth to adulthood of the child. In this poem the mother, after the sexual beginning, is a chaste single mother (if not quite the virgin-mother of Christian myth). It is perhaps not too fanciful, remembering triple Hecate, to see the season as a creative heavenly goddess at the opening of the ode, as an incarnate earth-goddess in the center, and as a disembodied goddess of Hades in the close. The orphaned creatures of the last stanza are not far from Proserpina in Hades pining for her lost mother. The poem remembers, with perfect fidelity, every phase of the mother's presence, from her active energy in animating all things to her relaxation and fatigue in her accomplished maternity, followed by her gradual decline into patient vigil. This poem spares us the vision of the mother's face "bright blanch'd / By an immortal sickness which kills not," but the mother's deathwards progress is both intimated in the second stanza and confirmed in the third as she, the soft-dying day, is attended by her grieving children just as she herself attended the last drops from the cider-press. 

The love which Keats has shown for the goddess during the first two stanzas threatens, in his deathbed watch, to turn into pity and grief alone, though it is only by her death that he has been prompted to call her back to life in verse. For a moment, resolve and art falter, and, forgetting his independent poetic energy, Keats feels like a gnat blown hither and thither, like a lamb, however full-grown, bleating for the ewe. The poem, in this mythological construct, gives full credence to the child who remains within every adult, and to the infant crying in the night at the mother's death. The great effort of will required to convert grief into something that can legitimately be called not wailing or mourning or bleating but song is at once the effort to rise from childhood to adulthood and the effort to assume the musical objectivity of the Orphic voice. To leave a group converging downward to the deathbed and join a group in the skies is to make that same growth in stature and expansion of view.

One is not exempt, however, while lifting one's vision above temporal ravage and lifting one's voice in song absolved of grief, from conveying some metaphysical sense of the lived import of
existence and death. Keats borrows, as I have said above, the Shakespearean absolution of nature from villainy, and sees life, as Shakespeare does, "Consum'd with that which it was nourished by." I think that Shakespeare's abandonment of the external agency of cold and black night taught Keats, too, to abandon his personification of Autumn. In letting the creatures (who seem, since Autumn here is exclusively a vegetation and harvest goddess, to be as independent of her agency as of her death) possess the final stanza, he permits the day to expire without causation, to die simply out of its own dissolution. Most of all, Keats learned from "Consum'd with that which it was nourished by" to make his poem one not of natural process alone, nor one of a vegetative season alone, but rather one in which harvest, the means of the human consumption of fruit, is necessarily linked with nourishment, the earth's fruition. And once the great paradox has been played out, with all inevitable reluctance, Keats can find a music worthy of "the death bed whereon it must expire."

The leisureliness and spaciousness with which the paradox of life's nourishment and consumption is enacted in the ode gives, however, a very different sense of life from that conveyed by Shakespeare's fiercely concentrated epigram. Keats's deployment of suspended time and expanded space, above all, forbids all conception of life as cramped, hurried, cut short, or incomplete. We are persuaded to think of it as thinning out into gleanings, oozings, and twitterings before it finally becomes invisible. In the ode, we have followed a multiplicity of rhythms at once so seasonal and so human that the nearly invisible last choir seems to suggest the participation of life in the rhythms of a third realm, an aesthetic one—more elusive than the natural vegetative realm of the opening or the human agricultural realm of the center, but standing over them and independent of them in a vibration of the ether, a polyphony in the skies. The gathering swallows were earlier called "gathered" swallows; but Keats, even in this ultimate moment, refuses agency, changes the modifier to "gathering," and permits the last motion of the poem to remain spontaneous and uncaused. He was perhaps tempted to make his last choir one solely of winged creatures, diminished nightingales; but as he had said in a July let-
ter, he had of late been moulting, and hoped to acquire not new wings but a pair of patient sublunary legs (Letters, II, 128). Into his flock of winged creatures (the last line originally began "And new flock still") Keats introduces a true georgic flock—the full-grown lambs, whose patient sublunary legs tether the final chorus to the ground. These are not pet-lambs of the sentimental farce that Keats feared to be made part of but lambs of the authentic georgic pastoral, keeping the poem mindful of the earth's bourn while its sounds are borne aloft (Keats would have been conscious of the echoing "bourn"—"borne" of earth and heaven).

Just as the human figure in the second stanza rises almost imperceptibly from among the fruits of the earth, so the voices of the last stanza rise invisibly above the extent of the stubble-plain, and form that suspiration of organic life paralleled by the light wind, itself the symbolic respiration of the inorganic world. If there is an "ideology" expressed by this ode, it is not only the Hesperian one described by Hartman, but also a georgic one which perceives the harmony among the varied rhythms which have evolved in man's long life in nature. Vegetative growth and human harvest combine to form a new sort of goddess, one who is available to all of us because she is ourself in our labor, as well as being the goddess of all that grows. Perhaps without Milton's Eve and the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, Keats's goddess, so clearly human, engaged in the work of life, patient in vigil, and eventually transubstantiated into an essence different from her human form, could not have been imagined. But this goddess embodies a reproof to Christian incarnational myth and Christian sacrificial suffering. She arises from no external necessity: Keats's universe contains no offended God exacting atonement. She incarnates herself, in fruition and habitation, simply out of that divine affinity between man and nature of which Keats was so sure, that mutual greeting of the spirit between "things real" and the senses. The rhythm of incarnation, growth, and self-sacrifice that permeates the poem is wholly self-generated, prompted by no debt, motivated by no agency, demanded by no doctrine. The poem represents a radical secularization of the Christian myth of the divine which incarnates itself in the human figure, a secularization prompted in part by Wordsworth's secularization
of Milton, but reaching to an unforced union of the natural, the
human, and the divine envisaged but not, I think, accomplished in
the spousal verse of the *Prelude*. In Keats's ode, that union of the
gods, the earth, and human labor has become, as Wordsworth had
hoped it would, "a simple produce of the common day."

The constitutive trope of the ode *To Autumn* is enumeration, the
trope of plenitude. In Keats's three lists—of flowers and fruit, of ap­
paritions of the goddess, and of autumn songs—we see that each
phase of the season is blessed by its own plural being. Keats needs
the whole of the natural world—earth, vegetation, population, ar­
chitecture, and sky—for his metaphor. Like his sun-inspired Season,
the poet, Keats implies, powerfully touches all things into life, but
his wand is the wand of Fancy; he too in creative energy loads and
blesses the bareness of the world with his working brain. Just as
surely, in sacrificial self-immolation, he gleans with his pen what his
fertile brain has conceived; as being passes into art, it loses its
"natural" shape and turns from "drooping oats" to grain, from ap­
plies to oozing drops, without however losing its truthful origin in
life. The beauty of poetry does not resemble mimetically the beauty
of life—how could it, consisting as it does of a light polyphony of
sound? The Gordian knot of representational verisimilitude—which
had perplexed Keats from *Psyche* through *Nightingale* to *Urn*—is
finally cut. Verisimilitude (or representational "Truth") is dismissed
as a criterion for poetic art. Two others are implicitly substituted:
the first, Keats suggests, is that poetry should derive from life (as
juice and grain derive from apples and corn); the second is a
criterion of appropriateness (the songs of the gnats and crickets are
appropriate to autumn as the song of the nightingale was ap­
propriate to spring).

Within the trope of plenitude, which is his symbolic form for the
season, Keats, in a powerful claim for the sensual power of poetry
vis-à-vis music and sculpture, satisfies each of the senses, higher and
lower alike, in a relaxation of censorship that dissolves the ethical
strenuousness of both *Indolence* (in its guilt) and *Melancholy* (in its
admonitions). The plenitude takes various syntactic forms, varying
from the simplest doublings ("mists and mellow fruitfulness," "load
and bless," "more, / And still more") to the amplest distribu-
utiveness, seen most clearly in the frequent apparitions of the goddess—found sitting, or asleep, and sometimes crossing a brook, or by a cider-press. (These sights are not alternatives but additives, as there seems scarcely a place where the goddess might not be sought and equally found.) We see the plenitude of one instrument after another being added to the choir: the gnats, and full-grown lambs; hedge-cricket; the red-breast; and gathering swallows. For the plenitude of multiple nouns, we find multiple verbs—mourn, and bleat, and sing, and whistle, and twitter. Keats offers the plenitude not only of lists but of generous (and seemingly incidental) detail, as we learn that the trees are "moss'd" and the cells are "clammy" and the flowers are "twined" and the lambs are "full-grown." Though all these details are functional, they read as gratuitous in their sensual pleasure. We encounter the plenitude of particular succeeded by generalization: "To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees, / And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core." We find as well the plenitude of repetition: "mellow fruitfulness," "to load and bless / With fruit . . . / And fill all fruit with ripeness"; "the winnowing wind," "the light wind"; "later flowers" and "twined flowers"; the "soft-lifted" hair and "the soft-dying day" and the "treble soft"; the soft-dying day and the wind that dies; the bourn and the gnats borne aloft; the songs of spring and the hedge-cricket that sing; the delighted infinitives "to load," "to bend," "to swell," "to set budding." The multiplication of instances, as Keats extends his lists (and seems never hurried, spinning out his stationing and his details), gives the exquisite variety of proportion a charm of waywardness that makes plenitude feel like profusion—a spray of flowers here, a garland there, a single blossom elsewhere, as one instance is lengthy (the bees), another terse (the gourd). While so much else is taken, the plenitude abides, never faltering in its invention, its variety, and its loveliness of disposition.

Keats, at the end of the poem, is the listener to his own music. It is not being used, as the nightingale's song was, to distract him from death: he listens intently while gazing at the full spectacle of a world vegetatively bare, if still offering something to the eye; he knows the day is dying. Beauty now includes as intrinsic components "absence, darkness, death—things which are not," as
Donne called them. Keats too is re-begot of these, but finds them present in coexistence with music—a dissonant and muted polyphony, but music nonetheless. Keats adopts many roles in this poem: he is, by way of his goddess and his creatures, successively a creator, the things created, a harvester, a seeker, a finder, a singer, and a listener to his own music. These roles permit him to exhibit the grand movements of profusion, decline, progressive expansion of view, sadness, and equanimity which coexist in the poem. Life, with its human seasons, and art, with its teeming, its gleaning, its transubstantiation, and its music, seem coterminous, and even indistinguishable, in this richest of the odes.

The language of the ode To Autumn is scarcely to be examined apart from the structure of the ode, since the structure is so actively constituted by the language, which is here less ornamental, and more entirely “necessary,” than in any of the earlier odes. The other odes tend to give signposts and signals, discursive and propositional, indicating which direction they are about to take; To Autumn, as I have said, takes implication to its furthest reaches, announcing almost nothing in propositional or conceptual terms, bringing symbol as close to mimetic appearance as possible. We must read the poem with Keats’s own mind—where “sun” equals “Apollo,” where “corn” equals “hopes,” where “mist” (as in the letter on “dark passages,” Letters, 1, 281) summons up “mystery,” where “the setting sun will always set me to rights” (Letters, 1, 186); where the dying tones that fill the air of evening receive their heavenly birth from Apollo, the god of bards; where the cells of bees equal “spiritual sweets”; and where Deity eases its heart of love by keeping peaceful sway above man’s harvesting. For Keats, it is certain, all these implications were in the poem. Its ethical basis he had discovered in Hyperion—that “the sacred seasons might not be disturb’d,” not even by the gods. Already in Endymion he had known the solution to the too simple trajectory of decline as a model of life: it could be more truly said that “life’s self is nourished by its proper pith, / And we are nurtured like a pelican brood.” The mother, Autumn, depletes herself as she gives up to us the
fruits of the earth and her life's blood; but how differently from Endymion the ode embodies the process, departing from the recollection in the pelican of Christian iconography, and correcting it into a harmonious transubstantiation from the sensual to the aesthetic. Nothing in the ode, to take another instance, seems more organic than the gnats; but if we read with the Keatsian mind we recall the passage they most derive from, occurring in the same letter as the passage "We are in a Mist—We are now in that state—We feel the 'burden of the Mystery.' " The gnats, it turns out, come from a passage in which Keats is worrying yet once more the relation between sensation and thought, and says that if we have (as he did) a temperament radically volatile, then sensations send us vertiginously up and down, out of control; but if sensations are accompanied by knowledge, we have wings to balance our risings and our fallings:

The difference of high Sensations with and without knowledge appears to me this—in the latter case we are falling continually ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again without wings and with all the horror of a bare shouldered Creature—in the former case, our shoulders are fledged, and we go thro' the same air and space without fear. (Letters, 1, 277)

The melodrama of "falling continually ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again without wings and with...horror..." has been chastened in the ode to the purity of "borne aloft / Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies"—and the gnats are partway between the security of knowledge (they have wings) and the helplessness of sensation (the wind is more powerful than they). Horror is mitigated to resignation; a youthful fearlessness in the possession of knowledge has been taught its limits. But without this passage, would we have felt confident in allegorizing the gnats? To read with the mind of Keats, insofar as that is possible, is to read the poem as it is right that it should be read, as though it were written, not in "English," but in "poetic," that language which each poet invents anew. The autumn ode, to continue in this vein, is the only one of the odes which does not contain the word "Adieu," and
yet we take it, with some reason, as one long adieu, Keats's valediction to the sensual world. We have warrant for that interpretation, once again, if we read with his mind, and recall the end of the epistle to his brother:

Now I direct my eyes into the west,
Which at this moment is in sunbeams drest:
Why westward turn? 'Twas but to say adieu!

For Keats to turn westward was to see Apollo and the laureled peers, to venerate the golden lyre, and to say adieu: this sort of shorthand is everywhere his practice in the ode. It makes for a poetry of immense suggestiveness; this symbolic weight, when joined to the principle of concatenation (which might, along with enumeration, be called the constitutive trope of this ode), makes continual "statements" without seeming to do so, and without having to use propositional form. There is no form (whether syntactic, grammatical, rhetorical, or descriptive) in the ode which is not symbolic, formally meaningful. Keats no longer needs to say, "The sacred seasons might not be disturb'd," because his fluidly moving concatenation of seasonal phase-motion says it for him. He has reproduced "th'inaudible and noiseless foot of time" (All's Well, v.iii; Keats marked the line). With respect to the debate on whether the swallows are migrating or not, whether their migration means they 'join a warm south' to the end of the poem (Hartman) or not, one can only cite Keats's quasi-proverbial use of the phrase "they all vanish like Swallows in October" (Letters, 1, 154), and say he thought of October swallows as annihilated beings. Though there are dangers in such associations as in any contextual readings, when there is a Keatsian context it seems folly to neglect it.

What I have said earlier about Keats's language in the ode had chiefly to do with the paradigmatic chains of linked significance—as the practical verbs load, bend, fill, swell, plump, set budding, and o'erbrim are one chain; and sitting, asleep, drowsed, keep steady, and watch (the verbs of habitual state) are another; and mourn, bleat, sing, whistle, and twitter are another; and fruit, vines, apples, gourd, hazel shells, and flowers are another (the creations); and granary, winnowing,
reaped, hook, gleaner, cyder-press, and gathering (the harvest words) are another; and mists, clammy, oozings, clouds (heavenly and earthly moisture) are another; and dying, wailful, mourn, dies are another. We usually refer to such groups as “image clusters”: but Keats’s are not, in the usual sense, decorative “imagery,” but rather thought-bearing. These chains organize the poem so closely (loading every rift with ore) that there is scarcely a word in the poem not straitly bound to other words, hardly a chink not filled. The syntax, too, being organized by the double parallelism of enumeration and concatenation, exists in a network full of redundancy—not a syntactic form but echoes, and is echoed by, another phrase. Where there is X, there will be Y; nothing, it seems, is to go lonely or unpartnered, syntactically speaking. If autumn is a season of mists it will also be a season of mellow fruitfulness. Or, if we take the larger apostrophic unit “X of Y” (“Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness”), it will be partnered by the next line, also an apostrophic “X of Y” (“Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun”). It is not necessary to insist on the way the syntactic parallels throughout are reinforced by the closely worked patterns of sound in the poem, where Keats is more careful than ever before to “weigh the stress / Of every chord” (Poems, p. 368). His ear has never been more industrious, his attention never more meet, his lyre never more closely inspected. He is here at once a “miser of sound and syllable” and profligate of both. The extreme parallelism in syntax creates a grand underlying simplicity which harmonizes the semantic variety of the poem. If, in the last stanza, we have five songs and differing vignettes, they are nonetheless presented in kernels which are syntactically almost identical:

  
  the small gnats mourn  
  full-grown lambs bleat  
  hedge-crickets sing  
  the red-breast whistles  
  gathering swallows twitter

All the odes, of course, exhibit some parallelism in syntax, but Autumn is the only one that organizes each of its stanzas by multiple syntactic parallels—the infinitives of the first stanza, the views of
Autumn (all objects of the verb "find") in the second stanza, and the kernel-sentences of song in the third stanza. Within this grand design of syntactic simplicity, variety has mimetic force, as in the long and playful phrase about the running vines, or the excursus on the rising and falling gnats. All through the poem, the strict procession of everything in parallel is a symbolic form standing for order, measure, necessity; while the internal variations stand for multiplicity, changefulness, and idiosyncrasy. All the creatures, in parallel, are compelled by their being to evening utterance—but while one mourns, another bleats, another sings, another whistles, another twitters. All the vegetation, in parallel, is compelled by the season to increase; but one is a fruit-loaded vine, another an apple-bent tree, another a swollen gourd, another a plumped shell, another a budding flower. The outlines differ, the verbs differ, but the principle of growth presses through each instance. No earlier ode so perfectly allows for unison and diversity.26

We see, of course, links with the language of the other odes. As I have said, Autumn herself is in part a descendant of the Spenserian Fancy of *Psyche*, but in *Psyche* nature is poor by comparison to the unbounded inventions of Fancy, while in *Autumn* no plenitude can be imagined that would outdo nature's own. And yet, Keats wrote to his brother just after composing this ode that Byron "describes what he sees—I describe what I imagine—Mine is the hardest task. You see the immense difference" (Letters, II, 200). This remark, coming on the heels of the ode, ought to remind us how wrong it would be to see the poem entirely in mimetic terms. Paul de Man has made us see that the poems of Yeats are most allegorical when seeming most natural, and has also, perhaps too emphatically, insisted that Keats's "naturalistic" description of America in *What can I do to drive away* is a self-portrait, of the mind starved and at bay.27 In reminding ourselves that Keats's Season is another version of the gardener Fancy touching all into bloom, not least (via Apollo) the stubble-plains, we link this ode to the other meditations on poetry. But if we continue to compare this ode with others, we are struck by the palpable absence here of the liturgical language present above all in *Psyche* and *Melancholy*. The clear religion of heaven will not here borrow its languages from the religions of earth. Only the "choir"
of gnats echoes the “virgin-choir” of *Psyche*; of rosy sanctuary and sovereign shrine, anthem or requiem, censer or altar, priest or priestess, there is no trace; and the speaker is neither consecrated votary, initiate of the *penetralia*, nor pale-mouthed prophet. The soul—the central figure in *Psyche*, itself alternately “idle spright” and dreaming lawn in *Indolence*, a property transferred to the nightingale who pours her soul abroad, the “spirit” which is opposed to the sensual ear in *Urn*, and the cloudy trophy of *Melancholy*—that “soul” has here vanished, as word and as entity. We might say that Autumn is all body; and when she is not body, she is grain and cider, transubstantiated body. She is not a deity engaged in peaceful sway above man’s harvesting; she is the harvester and the harvested. Keats had discovered, in *Melancholy*, that the experience of the spirit can be narrated in the vocabulary of the body—that to experience joy intensely is to burst a grape against a fine palate with a strenuous tongue. For a moment in that ode he is sure that by describing a tongue and a bursting grape and a fine palate, he is writing the history of intellect and emotion. It is in that conviction—that not propositions but images are the language of the philosophic mind—that *To Autumn* is composed.

In the language of the autumn ode there is no sublimity of the sort that Keats had found necessary in *Psyche* and the two *Hyperions*. Here there are no untrodden regions, no mountains, no fledged steeps, no ascent to a perilous altar. The plane of the poem is, until the end, a horizontal one. There are no pinnacles of imagined hardship; the Elgin marbles have come to drowse on the half-reaped furrow. The georgic vocabulary had of course appeared before in Keats (notably in *Endymion*), but in that poem whenever Keats wished the language to take on spiritual meaning, he had tended to make the analogy an explicit one, as when he spoke of the religious Powers

> whose benevolence
> Shakes hands with our own Ceres; every sense
> Filling with spiritual sweets to plenitude,
> As bees gorge full their cells.

*(Endymion, III, 37–40)*
There is, in this passage, a hanging back from severity of thought, an easy mingling of sense and spirit, which Keats had found possible before writing the last of the odes. In harshly separating sense from spirit in the *Urn*, Keats was repudiating this facile amalgam of senses and spiritual sweets; and yet the ascetic separation proved as artificial as the amalgam was thoughtless. *Autumn* uses sense to speak of spirit, but does so not by the means of emblem and gloss but rather by means of its own articulation of sensory elements. In the articulation itself (whether by lists, or by parallelism, or by choice of items) lies the spiritual import.

It is because he has chosen things and the articulation of things as the vehicle of spirituality—thereby depending on denotation and syntax for symbolic meaning—that Keats can here afford to be silent, mythologically speaking, and never once mention Ceres, or Proserpina, or Flora, or Pomona, or Arcady, or the Olympians, or Bacchus, or Apollo. The classical world is explicitly present in every other ode, and it was Keats’s boast, in *Psyche*, that if Milton had banished the classical deities from English poetry he would reinstate them: “I am more orthodox than to let a heathen Goddess be so neglected” (*Letters*, 11, 106). *Autumn* gives up the gods, at least by name. As a legacy (even if by contrast) from Milton they represented to Keats a self-destroying entanglement with Milton. A poetry self-consciously English, of the sort he is attempting in *Autumn*, can include no Greek names. Nor can it include classical artifacts and artists: there is no mention of urns, Phidias, Homer, or Attic shapes. Equally, it refuses European romance motifs: there is no *Provençal* song, no demon Poesy, no faery lands forlorn, no elves. History and human social forms are excluded: there is no emperor, no clown, no Ruth. And though Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, and Wordsworth are still the great Presiders here, there are no echoes so overt as to be outright allusions (like the allusions elsewhere in the odes to *Hamlet* or Milton or the *Excursion*).

As Keats determines to do without mythology, history, and literary allusion, so he also determines to do without the personal pronoun and without introspection—to do without a hero, we might say (the hero he had glorified in *Melancholy*). He also relinquishes natural and human architectural space: there will be no
bower or sanctuary; there will be no casement opening from a shelter onto a vista (almost a necessity in art, as in life, for Keats). We are never within the central cottage—the poem moves from its thatch-eaves outwards. It sounds perhaps odd to say that the mists and the generous fields outside the cottage are in fact transmuted forms of the foam and perilous seas of Nightingale, but I think the statement is nonetheless true. Keats has realized that there is only one expanse, not two; he will no longer invoke the contrast of the elfin grot with the cold hillside, of the fruits of the earth with the manna-dew. The links we can trace between La Belle Dame sans Merci and Autumn make the Belle Dame an early figure for the reaper: when the Belle Dame has finished her work the sedge has withered, the birds have fallen silent, the roses of the lover's cheeks have withered, the squirrel's granary is full, and the harvest is done. In putting the rosy hue back on the land's countenance, in reinvesting the cold hillside with warmth, and in releasing the birds once again into song, Keats is undoing, in Autumn, the charm he had wound up in La Belle Dame, reinstating an internal vitality of song in the landscape of deprivation. He is undoing at the same time, by giving human dimensions to the female Season, the various mythologically altered dimensions—from subhuman (Medusa) to superhuman (Melancholy and Moneta)—that he had attributed to female goddesses in the past. By making his goddess bride, mother, and dying earth-spirit, he goes beyond the brides Psyche and Urn, the demon Poesy, the virginal maiden on the urn, the elusive Dryad-Nightingale, and the purely tragic Moneta or the simply dualistic Melancholy.

It goes without saying that since Keats's central effort in the language of To Autumn is to have thoughts and emotions embodied by sensuous things, he suppresses all the abstract language of allegory—of the warm Love, of Fame and the demon Poesy, of Youth and Beauty and Phantoms and cold Pastoral and Melancholy and aching Pleasure and Delight and Joy. This abstract vocabulary is so supremely important in the other odes that its sacrifice is as great, for Keats, as the sacrifice of mythology. We might say that allegory and mythology had been the two symbolic systems—Spenserian and Miltonic—in which Keats had been nursed. The silent, nameless
concrete symbolic system of Autumn springs direct, as I have said, from Shakespeare’s “intensity of working out conceits,” which proved to be a way of “saying fine things unintentionally” (Letters, 1, 188). Keats’s study of Shakespeare’s images in the sonnets led him to see that “intention” could be left unsaid, that he no longer had to draw explicit parallels, as he had in When I have fears, between his pen and a gleaner, between rich garners and high-piled books, between feelings and full-ripened grain. As late as the July before the September in which he wrote the ode, he was still feeling obliged to draw the personal comparison: “The very corn which is now so beautiful, as if it had only taken to ripening yesterday, is for the market: So, why should I be delicate” (Letters, 11, 129). The conceit of the ripening corn is the richest in all of Keats, constantly in his mind. When Ruth stands amid the alien corn, it is the only time in Keats that corn is alien, and it is a mark of his extreme anguish at the demands of his own vocation at the time of Tom’s death that he could see the corn in that way, at the moment when he saw the faery land of imagination as forlorn. Both nature and art seemed to him, after his brother’s anguish, equally comfortless.

If I emphasize the linguistic asceticism of the ode To Autumn, its willing sacrifice of mythology, allegory, history, literary allusion, and personal reference, it is because it is so commonly celebrated as a poem of linguistic wealth. We can better judge the wealth that is there for seeing the wealth—common to the other odes—that is not, seeing the everything that is not there as well as the everything that is.

It is not that Keats, perceiving Shakespeare’s method of intensely working out a conceit, had not done something in this vein before. He had—in the shrine of Psyche and in the scherzo on wine in Nightingale, to give only two celebrated instances. But, unlike Shakespeare, he had offered a gloss (“in some untrodden region of my mind” to locate the shrine or, negatively, “not charioted by Bacchus and his pards” to explain the remarks on wine). What Keats was daring enough to do in Autumn was to take the Shakespearean example to its limit, and let the working out of the conceit speak entirely for itself. He thus forsooks, in his last
asceticism, that propositional language of "Truth" which he had thought necessary for running his flag up the admiral-staff—the language of explanation, justification, and philosophizing. For a poet aiming at "Thought" and "Truth," this was the riskiest asceticism of all. It meant the assertion that propositional language was not the only language in which Truth could dwell; and it meant that Sensation and Thought were not two things but one, providing one wrote of articulated sensation; that Beauty and Truth were not two things but one, providing one had stationed Beauty truly.

We have seen in part what the language of Autumn is: linked things, linked apparitions, linked actions, linked syntax—all not arbitrarily linked, but linked by minutest design. And we have seen what it is not: not mythological, nor liturgical, nor allegorical, nor romance-derived, nor historical, nor "literary," nor introspective, nor propositional. It remains true, however, that we sense a mythology (in the conspiring of sun and season, and in the central opulence of the harvest-figure), that we perceive a hymn of worship (in spite of the emphasis on description), that we derive from the poem allegorical meanings, that we sense in it a profound literary allusiveness, that we read it as a lyric and introspective poem, and that we take its own single proposition—"Thou hast thy music too"—to stand, implicitly, for many others. When we attempt to account for the indubitable presence in the poem of so much that it has renounced, we are driven in part, as I was in my first descriptions of the poem, to make explicit its delicate hints. We point out the sky-god and earth-goddess and bring into mythological literalness the euphemisms "bosom-friend" and "conspiring"; we expose the buried logic of the sequence ending in "o'er-brimm'd"; we call attention to the stasis in the midst of harvest; we indicate the absence of things we might expect to find (such as the harvest feast or the vintage); we bring consciously to the surface the silent lapping of time and the gentle expansion in space; we place the ode in its subgenres (the cult-hymn, the georgic, the valediction, the
pastoral elegy); we see its conceit-subjectivity after the manner of
the Shakespearean sonnet; we even see its lingering-out homage to
the sonnet form.

But having done all this, we need to let the ode subside once
again into its low relief. It never announces or insists on any of its
lapses and expansions and changes of focus. Not a breath of in­
sistence or announcement will it give. We scarcely notice that one
sense has been touched into responsiveness and then allowed to
relax as another is brought into play. The severe and controlled ex­
aminations of one sense at a time in the preceding odes have borne
their fruit: as the autumn ode opens, we are ready to indulge all the
tactility and taste learned in Melancholy; in the center of the poem,
we call on all the visual disposition of classical figures learned in In-
dolence and Urn; and as the ode draws to a close, we invoke all the
fineness of ear learned in Nightingale. The more strenuous actions of
earlier odes reappear here in a gentler form: the intense cultic vows
of Psyche and Melancholy and The Fall of Hyperion have modulated
into a habitual love; Keats’s quests—the desperate pursuit on the
urn, and the aching for wings to follow the allegorical figures in In-
dolence and the bird in Nightingale, together with the wild voyage in
the draft of Melancholy—yield to the generous and frequent finding
of the goddess in the fields; the bursting of Joy’s grape is slowed to
the o’er-brimming of the honeycomb and the oozing of the cider­
press; the “for ever” of the Urn is modestly restricted to the
“sometimes” and “oft” of the rewarded quest and to the “now” of
the dispersed creatures.

In all of these mitigations, easings, and softenings we sense
Keats’s less combative attitude. His native pugnacity and ardor give
the earlier odes their vivid energies; but in moulting, and
substituting for his wings a pair of patient sublunary legs, he
slowed his pace; in becoming a chrysalis again, he watched, and
waited, and took notes through his two loopholes of vision. A year
earlier, when he had felt “blind in mist” on Ben Nevis, he had been
in despair:

I look into the chasms, and a shroud
Vaprous doth hide them; just so much I wist
Mankind do know of hell: I look o'erhead,
And there is sullen mist; even so much
Mankind can tell of heaven: mist is spread
Before the earth beneath me; even such,
Even so vague is man's sight of himself . . .
... All my eye doth meet
Is mist and crag—not only on this height,
But in the world of thought and mental might.

(Read me a lesson, Muse, 3-14)

Now, between the mists of dawn and the clouds of sunset, Apollo is still obscured; but the rage has gone.

If, then, the language of the ode can best be seen to be what it is—a language ascetic, scaled down, softened in tone, and wonderfully consistent—by comparison with the other odes in their multiple “languages,” their more “imaginative” scope, their higher pitch, their more ambitious range—then the ode is best read as the end of a sequence of experiments in the recording of thought and feeling and language, its values and hues seen accurately only in the company of its peers. But then one can also separate it from them, and look at it alone. Once its own level is taken for granted, and its intimacy of tone and delicacy of progress are seen not contrastively but absolutely, we can ask, within this special language of insensible change and reflective praise, what distinguishes one stanza from another, besides the obvious differences in the senses appealed to, the putative stanza “topic” (fruits, harvest figure, and music), and “focus” (broadening out, lapsing down). Here we come to the central question: what, here, has Keats “imagined”? (“I describe what I imagine.”) He has imagined, first of all, what John Bayley has called the domestic but what I would prefer to call the inseparability of the domestic and the wild, the agricultural and the natural, as the wild (notably the closing choir) is the context for the domestic, and the agricultural the counterpart of the natural. The very vagueness of “all fruit” and “later flowers” enlarges the early domestic cottage garden to a natural realm outdoing, as I have said, even the gardener Fancy’s. In the second stanza, wind and winnowing intertwine like the natural poppies and the cultivated-corn, much as
the man-made hook lies on a natural furrow and the laden head is seen in conjunction with a brook; finally, a machine of force, a press, is juxtaposed with the natural, "voluntary" action of oozing (not spurting, not involuntary).

In the third stanza the clouds (by transferred action) are imagined as (human) painters and the gnats are a (human) choir and the wind, like an animate being, lives and dies; the crickets have a song and the red-breast a musical "treble" and the swallows are said to be "gathering" (the most elusive transfer of an agricultural word). Art (in painting of hues, in song, in treble, and in choir), nature, cultivation, and the domestic (the lambs) are here all "imagined" as inseparable in conjoined action. If they were not so "imagined" we should be reading Thomsonian description; and we know we are not.

Keats's "imaginings" bear and sustain inquiry into their most minute parts. As he "imagines" what ripeness is, he imagines first its bearers (the vines, the trees). Here, fruit is an ornamentation, an enhancement, a blessing; it is the vines that are loaded and blessed with grapes, it is the trees that are bent with apples. Ripeness is here a possession, a solace, and a welcome burden. Next, ripeness is repletion, being filled to the core; Keats's empathy now is for the emptiness that has been longing to be filled, and that feels now what fullness is, to the very center of its being. Next, ripeness is expansion into amplitude of outline (the swelling of the gourd); next, it is the introduction of a new interior, glandlike swelling—almost, one might say, the adolescence of fruit, as it is plumped with a sweet kernel; next, it is simple multiplicity ("more, and still more later flowers"); next, it is teleological ("flowers for the bees"); next, it is production beyond containment, as the cells are o'er-brimmed. This is the imagining of all possible definitions of ripeness. It is in this sense that Keats, we may say, has begun to "philosophize." He philosophizes by finding, for every analytic relation of ripeness that he perceives, an appropriate synthesis of verbs and nouns, and their appropriate syntactic relation. In the fine discriminations of this stanza we can see an advance over the simpler "intensities" of the figure of reiteration in the nightingale ode.

We may see the same careful degree of analysis in the description
of the harvest figure. She is first defined by her attributes (mists and fruitfulness), next by her sexual relationship (as bosom-friend and co-conspirer with the sun), next by her agency ("to load and bless" and so on). These are all conventional ways of defining a divinity; the missing one is the definition by genealogy (Autumn is, like the urn, a bride, in this case a bride of the sun, not of quietness, but she is no one's child, foster or otherwise, because she is, like Spenser's Dame Nature, the Magna Mater). Seasons have no parents, only antecedents (each other); the link to antecedence is made here with the mention of Autumn's two antecedents, summer and spring. Seasons have no progeny of their own ilk, only consequents—again, each other. The only item suppressed in the ode is winter. We may wonder whether it is out of pain or out of discretion that Keats decides against mentioning it. He did not flinch from it in the sonnet on the human seasons; and I think he does not flinch from it now, especially since the open mentions of death (in the wind and the day) show his willingness to bring all closures forward to inspection. I think that he has realized, like Wittgenstein (in Robert Lowell's formulation), that "Death's not an event in life, it's not lived through." We cannot either describe or "imagine" winter.

Keats will end his analysis of the seasonal figure as he began, with one of her attributes: besides mists, she has music (if not melodies). But in between beginning and ending comes his second philosophical analysis of the figure, this time not by her agency but by the disposition of her figure. In the first vignette, the balance of figure and ground is, so to speak, equal: Autumn sits careless on the floor, her hair is soft-lifted by the wind. There is a balance of forces, and they suggest equanimity and tranquillity and stability. In the second vignette, the forces of nature have overbalanced, momentarily, the forces of cultivation; the half-reaped furrow, the fume of poppies, the swath and its flowers, briefly maintain themselves during the sleep, the drowse, and the hook-in-abeyance of the harvest figure; but then the balance shifts decisively again as she rises in dominance, all laden head and steadiness, over the subject brook. Lastly, she is poised in statuesque patience, her tool, the cider-press, having ended its work of subduing the apples. The
resistances of nature to harvest are given their due, as they vary
from powerful (the fume) to obstructive (the brook) to pathetic
(the slowness of the last oozings); but all resistance is in vain. After
the careless repose, the threshing will be completed; after the noon­
day rest, the latter half of the furrow will be reaped, and the last
basket will be taken across the brook; and the last oozing will be
"pent in walls of glass" as summer's distillation.²⁹ Cultivation, in
its agricultural victory, means the end of nature—fields of corn,
poppies, apples, all; the last steps across the fields and beyond the
brook close the imagined history of harvest and resistance.

I have said enough earlier about the autumnal music to show
how fully it too is "imagined," how analytic it is of attitudes
warding the cutting down of nature by the introduction of cultiva­
tion. This is a poem about nature, and civilization, and the conse­
quent discontents and blessings. If the ode inherited its compen­
satory sunset rhetoric from Wordsworth, it does not give his
answer, that our capacity to make metaphor is our reward in
adulthood for our loss of original intensity of sense. Keats felt, so
far as we can see, no diminution of sensual intensity in adulthood;
on the contrary. His grief here is for change and death, meta­
phorical and actual, for the absolute certainty of the reaped furrow,
the crushed apples, and the vanished poppies. He declares—
silently, by his poem's sequence—that song can occur only after
harvest, in the stubble-plains. For the work of every swath reaped,
a soft treble; for the work of every grain winnowed, a wailful
choir. For the singing, there has to have been reaping and press­ing;
for reaping and pressing, there must have been ripening
and budding. Keats takes, in the fullest scanning perspective, the
measure of his art and its cost in teeming and sacrificing, realizing
that the gardener Fancy and the scything Autumn and the spectral
singers at the close are all manifestations of triple Hecate, maiden,
mother, and tragic Muse. Keats had not been able to write music
for Melancholy (the only ode without some music, since even In­
dolence has the thrrostle's lay) because he made his soul, in that poem,
into a cloudy trophy; here, by releasing the soul after its suffering
into the canonical psychic form of a singing creature, he can replace
the thrrostle of Indolence, the virgin-choir of Psyche, the bird of
Nightingale, and the pipes and timbrels of Urn with melodies uttered by nature, heard by the sensual ear but attributed (as "thy music") to a divinity herself in mourning for the nightingale.

This divinity—the season—is the first of Keats's allegorical figures to incorporate effortlessly into itself, in its very concept, the notion of transiency. In Nightingale and Melancholy transiency was attributed post hoc, as I have said, to figures (Youth, Beauty, Love, Joy, Pleasure, Delight) not in themselves intrinsically, by their iconic name, possessing it. It was Keats's genius to light on the one expansive natural symbol which, if it were not transient, would not be itself—a season. In singing a hymn to a season, he is worshiping Beauty-incorporating-its-own-ending. He had first conceived of this possibility under the rubric of action in Melancholy, as to taste the grape is de facto to destroy it. But one cannot worship an action as one can worship a divinity. Keats's search for a divinity fully adequate to what he knew to be true of life had taken him from Poesy, Fame, and Love through the eternal Soul (Psyche), the art of Music, and the art of Sculpture, to the figure of Paradox (Melancholy's inextricable joy and grief), to the figure of Mutability itself in Moneta. But Moneta's changes are exclusively tragic, a one-directional progress toward a death that never comes. And since Moneta does no labor, but is only a cultic priestess and visionary, this image, too, must finally have seemed inadequate to Keats. He stops, in the last ode, at Change, but it is a change that mercifully, unlike Moneta's theater, comes to an end. The day dies, the season ends, the vistas end in horizons and skies, the fruits end in oozings. The end is not exclusively tragic. If there is decline in the landscape, there is also expansion of view; if there is blankness to the eye, there remains memory, the source of art. The change of Autumn occurs between a terminus a quo (the late summer blooming) and a terminus ad quem (the last days of the season). In that sense the ode continues the processional sense of life evident in Urn, with the town as the nostalgic limit of origin, and the sacrificial altar the limit of envisaged end. In one philosophical analysis of life (as a determinate span) and art (as a self-contained product), this metaphor (of a procession that occasionally arranges itself on an artwork in a beautiful stasis) is defensible. But Keats's sense of life cannot be contained within the high
decorum of the processional Urn: in the last analysis he thinks of the poet as a worker, one who does socially productive labor. The leaf-fringed legend swells into leaves of reality, the figure detaches herself from the urn and moves into the fields, the altar turns to a threshing floor, and the sacrificial heifer suffers an earth-change into corn and apples. Between the terminus of summer and the end of autumn Keats creates a world of beauty, labor, and nourishment that seems the only possible one in which to live.

Keats's last ode turns away from that meditation on the art of tragic drama which generated the inner globe-theater of Moneta's skull. Keats's Shakespearean ambitions, and his own attempt at historical drama in Otho the Great, had led him to make history and memory the principles of Moneta's omniscient dramatic art. But The Fall of Hyperion is at odds with itself, offering, within epic narrative, an aesthetic of theater, as Keats's admiration of Milton and Shakespeare conflates their genres. The Fall of Hyperion itself, deflected somewhat from Spenser and Milton by Dante, has in fact no consistent aesthetic of its own: the didactic concerns of the induction on the poet's role, the lyric vision of Moneta's perpetual theater, and the epic history of the Titans have not found a common aesthetic territory, or a theoretical base in Keats's letters.

Against the unsteadiness of the Hyperions we can set the coherence of Autumn, where Keats's sense of what his art is and what it can do is unshakably secure. If we draw out the implications of the ode with respect to creation, we see first Keats's extreme relief and even happiness. The work of creation, he tells himself, if he is to take his example from the work of the Season, is illimitable: there are always more boughs to bless, more honeycombs to fill, more flowers to be brought to bud. The principle of inspiration—Apollo, the sun—is eternal; the principle of conspiration—the earth's receptivity—can never fail. These represent in this poem the "things real" and the "greeting spirit"; and both are here affirmed perpetual, and—an immense source of relief—rather maintained by mystery than obstructed by it. Growth in knowledge comes not by striving; it comes when the poet, in his negative capability, is "content to look / On mists in idleness," without any irritable reaching through the mists or the barred clouds to try to
see the face of Apollo plain. The tolerance of mist as mystery exculpates indolence and renames it the openness of the flower: the "spiritual Cottager" (Letters, I, 255) allows himself in this ode the time for the "innumerable compositions and decompositions which take place between the intellect and its thousand materials before it arrives at that trembling delicate and snail-horn perception of Beauty" (Letters, I, 265).

The renaming of indolence as receptivity enables Keats (as his simile of the flower and the bee suggests—Letters, I, 232) to integrate the "feminine" (or the languorous or the drowsy) into himself, and dismiss the too strenuous, masculine heroic image of self and art recommended in Melancholy. In consequence, the receptive sexual basis of creativity is gratefully admitted, and Thought (as Apollo) and Sensation (as Earth) are now conceived of as a golden pair, inseparable. The mutual vivifying breath that issues in their conspiring is both creative spirit and sensual exhalation; and the production of the physical artifact—a grape, an apple—is at the same time a loading (in the physical world) and a blessing (as the embodiment of a divine idea). In this ode, art has no single favored shape (a bird, an urn, a shrine); the homely gourd is as paradisal as the apple. Nor is there any hierarchy of genres; the goddess of the cult hymn has come among the laborers and the insects; sublime art and folk art insensibly join. Autumn, the season-artist, though at times solitary in her work of embodiment and harvest alike, is not alone: the originating impulse which set her to work was her conjunction with Apollo, and her audience comes abroad to seek and find her in the fields (a "finding" impossible to imagine between Ruth and the nightingale, though the song "found" Ruth). The art of lyric, in Keats's homage to it, is shown to combine the powers of music and the powers of plastic art (the creatures, the sculptural goddess), and is proved to range from the decorative (the adornment of the earth) to the concentrated (the distillation of summer in the honey) to the elusive (in the last choirs). It is an art both male, in idea and blessing, and female, in creative engendering and work and contemplation. It benefits the world, and delights in its own creation. It also is the harvester—and a conscious undoing harvester—of its own fruits. It does not only (like Robert Frost)
gather apples; it crushes them. It does not only (like Shakespeare) bear in the sheaves; it threshes the corn. It is less interested in the store which such processes produce (the poet has in fact no interest in the store—there are no rich garnerers here except those of the bees, no full granary) than in the process by which the transubstantiation takes place, in which both the fruit and the harvester are disembodied. A poet does not read his past poems, nor look for himself in them; he has been placed by his new access of knowledge into a new state of ignorance (Letters, 1, 288) and is once more busy with his compositions and decompositions.

There is, the autumn ode tells us, a lyric music appropriate to every hour and to every season; an endless succession of lyric tones are generated by the spirit’s greeting of the earth, by dreaming taking its colors from something of material sublime. The musical art of the nightingale and the sculptural art of the urn are both triumphantly enclosed within the art of verbal lyric, which can, if the autumn ode is to be believed, express a flowery tale of Ceres more sweetly than the urn itself, and can rival, in its heard melodies of breath, the melodies of natural music. Lyric—to Keats’s supreme joy—admits guiltlessly all five senses, and pleases all five senses, not directly (as he had mistakenly thought in the “glutting” of Melancholy), but with “spiritual sweets.”

Keats’s perplexed mind has come to the great discovery that lyric makes sense by giving a natural sensual topography to the algebra of thought. Into every presented equation of stationed objects, we can read an analogical “meaning”: though no two readers will formulate the embodied idea identically, Keats’s stationing (let us say of the sequence of the goddess sitting careless, asleep, steadying her head, crossing a brook, and watching with patient look) governs quite closely the range of meanings which are possible under the rubric of the lyric equation (carelessness followed by drowsiness, followed by a wakened alert care, closed by a patient vigil “hours by hours”). Keats’s notion of lyric allows for dreaming (“conspiring”), for a drugged intoxication during the work of transubstantiation (“the fume of poppies” halfway through the reaping), for the reluctance (“sparing the swath”) to continue the intellectual creative work which undoes the beautiful appearances of sense, and for the
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will to garner represented by the burdened but steady traversing of the brook. The wakeful anguish of the soul, purified into a vigil over essence in its slow disappearance, is equally given its due. The poet's lawful ambition to deck the whole world and to be sought out from afar amid his store is not repudiated; the effortlessness of access to art is taken for granted, since everyone who seeks the goddess may find her. Keats's art has never wished to be hermetic; the nightingale poured forth her soul and anyone could listen; the figures on the urn are finally proved to need no explanatory legend. "[These poems] will explain themselves—as all poems should do without any comment," said Keats, sending George his rondeaus (Letters, ii, 21). The single most important discovery of the poem is that the passing from dreaming to waking is the moment not of void, but of store and of utterance; without the scythe and the cider-press, there would be no grain and no oozings and no impetus to listen to the autumn voices. The poem does not go inward (to a shrine, to a bower, to the penetralia); it moves outward to engirdle the earth. It both stations the self in the center of the world, watching and listening, and dissolves the same self into music. The poem is sometimes prospective (in its conspiring) and sometimes nostalgic; it can bring itself equally well to think of the present sensual moment and of its own subsequent thread of sound. It can remember the songs of spring and it can forget that warm days will ever cease. It can move with time in organic process or it can oscillate up and down like the gnats in thought. It is mimetic; it is (in its antiphony) dialectical; it is (in recounting the day and the season) parabolic in its rise and fall; it is (here, by not disturbing the sacred season) ethically admonitory in its rhythms of passage, its concatenations and articulations. It is propositional (after its algebraic fashion); and most of all, it is multiple.

This ode is multiple in the roles it allows the lyric self (as worshipper, appreciator, painter, consoler, and elegist); but chiefly it is multiple in the number of polyphonic effects, each pointing in a slightly different—or even contradictory—direction, which it can simultaneously sustain. Here, there are so many vectors—those several organizing motions, each one of them kept going till the end, Keats's great discovery for depth in lyric—that, depending on
the weight one gives to each in summing up the result of their interacting forces, one feels differently about the poem. Sometimes the vector of decline governs, sometimes that of expansion, sometimes creativity, sometimes sacrifice, sometimes plenitude, sometimes necessity. The absolute economy of the organization can, finally, make the ode seem to have the pure aspect of a geometric theorem; its "proof" is as austere as its symbols are luxuriant. Those abstractions into which Keats lapsed, which were his only life, here take their own life, as he wished them to, from the material sublime. The anguish and struggle of all the other odes are not forgotten (we scarcely know whether to name the autumn figure Indolence, Poesy, Psyche, Delight, Melancholy, or Moneta). The other odes are remembered with homage through the lightest of allusions to their subjects, their rhetorical shapes, their constitutive tropes, their goddesses, and their explorations of sense and thought—we see a reminiscent cloud here, a grape there, a Greek figure, a question and a proposition, a drowsiness, a song, a creating gardener-fancy, a quest for a divinity, a fragrance of flowers, a replication of earthly scene, an embracing couple. The adieu of the poem is so widely faithful it need not be spoken aloud.

In an early sonnet, beset by dark vapors on the plains, Keats wished for a time when the vapors would disappear and he could see "Autumn suns / Smiling at eve upon the quiet sheaves" (Poems, p. 89). It is clear that he now knows it to be impossible to keep the sheaves, or to see the sun without obscuring clouds. In that sense, Autumn is tragic, but it is not tragic as the other odes are. The Fall of Hyperion had been the occasion for the revisiting of all the tragic places of the previous odes—especially Nightingale and Melancholy. Keats's tragic, lurid, guilty, and fevered recollections were drawn off there, leaving a clear pastoral middle ground as the ample terrain of the last ode—or so we would say if the stern perfection of its structure did not tempt us to see in it the extracting genius of essence itself at work, where the tragedy of necessity cannot tell itself apart from the fluid current of desire.