

A Perfect Poem?: History, Meaning and Influences in John Keats's "To Autumn"

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ABSTRACT: This article seeks to consider different interpretations and meanings of Keats's "To Autumn", the last of the *great odes*, written on 19th September 1819. Among English Romantic poetry texts, this composition offers a serene description, although there are critics who have highlighted its ideological overtones. We intend to analyze the sense of each stanza, identifying the influences on the text. In spite of the fact that the reader can see that the word 'ode' is not present explicitly in the title, this is not a problem, since there can be no doubt that we must understand this composition as such, and it has even been considered to be a perfect work. Having studied the structure and the relationship between "To Autumn" and Keats's *Spring Odes*, especially "Ode on a Grecian Urn", it seems necessary to resolve the ambiguity that is documented throughout the poem. Recalling that the composition suggests, or at least tries to show, a revival of nature, there is some degree of frustration, as Winter symbolizes death, while the 'poetic ego' desires to believe in a season that is still remote.

KEY WORDS: "To Autumn", Keats, *great odes*, English Romantic poetry, influences, *Spring Odes*, frustration, Winter, death.

To my mother, because she is the spring
So summer went and so the autumn goes
John Clare

To Autumn

SEASON of mists and mellow fruitfulness!
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o'er-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,
 Drowsed with the fumes of poppies, while thy hook
 Spares the next swath and all its twinèd flowers;
 And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
 Steady thy laden head across a brook;
 Or by a cider-press, with patient look,
 Thou watchest the last oozings, hours by hours.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
 Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,
 While barrèd clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
 And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
 Then in a wailful choir, the small gnats mourn
 Among the river shallows, borne aloft
 Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
 And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
 Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
 The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft,
 And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

When Keats wrote "To Autumn", he decided to abandon *Hyperion*. On the one hand, Keats shows his passion for simple and daily routines, but at the same time the composition may offer an ideological meaning, although we must admit that this is hardly detectable at first sight. In fact, despite its limited extension, "To Autumn" comprises many interpretations in a "perfect piece of style" (Tate 1959: 168). Frequently, "To Autumn" is considered as the great poem by Keats's, but T. S. Eliot states his preference for another poem: "The Odes —especially perhaps the 'Ode to Psyche'— are enough for his reputation" (Eliot 1964: 100).

Precisely Keats was in the zenith of his career from February 1818, that is, the period in which he started *Isabella*, until September 1819, when he composed "To Autumn"¹. This last poem adopts a tripartite model, whereas its development is based on a classic vision.

For a long time, Keats's works were misinterpreted. We must not forget that *Endymion* was unjustly undervalued in the *Quarterly Review*, *Edinburgh Review* and *Blackwood's Magazine*². In any case, we can confirm that 'sensuousness' represents one of

¹ Arthur Downer (ed.), "The Personal History of John Keats", *The Odes of Keats*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897, 1-6.

² See, in this regard, Shelley's letter addressed 'To the Editor of the *Quarterly Review*' (Pisa, 1820). [John Wilson Crocker], "VII. *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*". By John Keats. *Quarterly Review* 19/XXXVII (April/December 1818), 204-8, partially reprinted in "*Endymion: A Poetic Romance* by John Keats", *Critics on Keats*, edited by Judith O'Neill. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1970, 11-2. [John Gibson Lockhart], "1. *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*. 2. *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and other Poems*. By John Keats, Author of *Endymion*". *Edinburgh Review* XXXIV/LXVII (August/November 1820), 203-13.

the archetypal characteristics of Keats's poetry. If most of the critics repeat Keats's portrait of Winchester, McGann prefers an ideological perspective.

It is true that Keats composed "To Autumn" while he lived in Winchester, and at the same time we know certain indications about its famous walk. However, we will never truly find out for sure where he lived, although Ross thinks that Keats might have lived "in the western part of Colebrook Street" (Ross 1995: 51). In fact, this precision is not important for the analysis of this composition.

"To Autumn" seems to show Keats's tranquillity in Winchester, approximately from 12th August to early October, although this peace was disturbed by St. Peter's Massacre. Keats's radicalism is present, for example, in '[c]onspiring' (l. 3), so this term could refer to Henry Hunt's activities, whereas gleaner's work (l. 19) constitutes another reference to Keats's time. It is evident that "To Autumn" germinated because of Keats's memories of a walk he had once taken in complete solitude (Jones 1969: 226).

First, it is curious that Keats chose the ode as a structural model, transmitted throughout English tradition with Pindaric versions, whose apogee happened during the eighteenth-century. If Keats declared a notable classical influence, he used the ode as a romantic instrument, especially in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn". With regard to more formal aspects, "To Autumn" has three stanzas, each one consists of eleven lines. In principle it seems that the structure is asymmetric³. Nevertheless, the rhythmical scheme corrects this circumstance, because the poem shows the repetition of the Shakespearean quatrain (*abab*), followed by a septet in each part (*cdedcde*, *cdecddde*, *cdecddde*), with their corresponding variation.

The beginning of "To Autumn" evokes the first line of "Ode on a Grecian Urn", although with a change in its tonality, given that the initial stanza of this last composition constitutes a continual apostrophe, whereas Keats prefers to use the descriptive procedure in the introduction of "To Autumn", as happens in John Reynolds's poem:

I saw old Autumn in the misty morn
Stand shadowless like Silence, listening
To Silence, for no lonely bird would sing
Into his hollow ear from woods forlorn,
Nor lowly hedge nor solitary thorn;—
(Reynolds 1971: 737, ll. 1-8)

Contrary to "Ode on a Grecian Urn", Keats proposes that time exists in its cyclical demonstration in "To Autumn", whereas the lovers remember eternity with his expression, because it repeats human suffering; the paradox lies in the fact that the moment is the same forever, since the observer can contemplate an artistic object whose surface is decorated with many scenes. Keats's letters show that his "To Autumn" is related to nature, as we may appreciate in this extract addressed to J. H. Reynolds:

³ Vid. John A. Minahan, *Word like a Bell. John Keats, Music and the Romantic Poet*. Kent, Ohio: The Kent University Press, 1992, 181.

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 field 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 (Keats 1938: 184).

It is possible to interpret that the first stanza of Keats’s “To Autumn” contains an apostrophe addressed to Autumn (“Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness!” Keats 2001: 249, l. 1), whereas we can hold that the second section defines the rural activities. On the other hand, the third stanza increases autumnal qualities. The first stanza supposes the compilation of materials belonging to classical sources, since decline is still not present; the second section embodies a period of transition, where narcotics have effect, because they are necessary to support the truth of life. So we may see some images derived from imagination and fantasy, with a few illustrations that swing between life and death, since there are many words related to unconsciousness.

Autumn is magnified and personified, and this season constitutes the central line, because the poem spins on its axis, at the same time that beauty and truth are conceived as the founder qualities of “Ode on a Grecian Urn”. Spring condenses numerous elements that decorate it, but according to Keats, Autumn has no reason to be envious of it, in spite of the fact that readers are not convinced, because of the melancholy that we can see in the last stanza of “To Autumn”.

The first stanza proposes a sensorial perspective (Blackstone 1970: 95), in accordance with autumnal maturity. The contrast contained in the first line expresses the harvest during Autumn, presented as the opportune season for this purpose. Nevertheless, such a period can be labelled as deceptive, since not in vain ripeness happens in Spring and Summer, whereas Autumn just stands to show an abundance that other seasons have caused. “To Autumn” consists of a demand of a specific time that transfers to the poem its structure (Wilcox 1956: 194).

“To Autumn” conveys plenitude, which we can extend to human maturity. The introduction entails a sensitive mixture, but Bland prefers to relate the initial moment only to taste, touch and smell (Bland 1954: 220). However, sight materializes in the perception of the sun and fog, whereas bees represent a season that foretells cold.

In the first stanza of “To Autumn” the visual perspective shows its predominance if we observe some images like ‘To bend with apples the moss’d cottage-trees’ (l. 5), whose sensation is completed with ‘load’ (l. 3) and with ‘[...] fill all fruit with ripeness to the core’ (l. 6). Such a process appears one more time in ‘plump’ (l. 7), although in this case this adjective is used as a verb, whereas the alliteration is present in the last line of the first stanza: ‘For Summer has o’er brimm’d their clammy cells’ (l. 11).

The revival of Spring symbolizes an ironic movement in the composition that presents autumnal activities, which are a sign of Winter and maturity. Keats decides to describe Autumn as a sublime time, but this characteristic serves to increase the opposition between this season and Spring, which grows spontaneously in the reader’s mind. The second stanza provides the predominance of visual functions over tactile ones, as if the

composition facilitated the progressive loss of its first qualities. In any way, and in view of the imminent decline, the 'poetic ego' needs the help of narcotic elements. If in this ode Keats mentions poppies and the cyder-press, hemlock and wine are present in "Ode to a Nightingale", apart from the participation of mythological entities. This resource appears in the allusion to the Lethe River both in "To Autumn" (l. 4) and in "Ode on Melancholy" (l. 1). Although there are many references to the hallucinogenic substances in the *great odes*, it does not mean that Keats was a habitual consumer, on the contrary, we can only surmise it:

The opium history of Crabbe, Coleridge, De Quincey, Wilkie Collins, Francis Thompson, is documented; there is contemporary evidence that they did take opium before they wrote the works discussed in this book. Keats is the exception, and that is why he appears at the end of this book, out of the chronological order [...] (Hayter 1968: 311).

The second stanza presents an evident dynamism if we think that the gleaner tries to cross a brook (Leavis 1978: 246), since she has to keep steady so as not to lose her load. Although, the two first figures denote immobility, since the 'winnow' is sitting, whereas the reaper is sleeping. This section shows a potential level, so time only exists in the first stanza. Eternity is the truth, that is, Keats tries to show beauty focusing on plenitude. The references to the chronological dimension ('more, / And still more', ll. 8-9; 'later', l. 9) do not act as temporal particles in the strict sense of the word (cfr. Southam 1960: 94), since all of them reflect beauty and their loss. In the structure of this stanza an irregularity that implies a characteristic movement is visible, and is also present in the composition entitled "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill". So we confirm that the swaying of the trees in "To Autumn" happens at the same time in the second poem if we focus on the rocking of some fish who swim in a brook: "Where swarms of minnows show their little heads, / Staying their wavy bodies 'gainst the streams" (Keats 2001: 5, ll. 72-3).

The images of the second stanza depend on 'find' (l. 13), and there are many variants organized later. The zenith is placed in *-ing* forms ('sitting', l. 14; 'winnowing', l. 15) and in temporal references ('hours by hours', l. 22). Around these elements we can annotate the nucleus of this tripartite model.

The feminine figure, who can also procreate, may be sitting, so perhaps we must identify her with Demeter, whose Latin name is Ceres, the goddess of agriculture. Traditionally this goddess is represented at rest, whereas some of her attributes are poppies: "[...] careless on a granary floor" (l. 14). The ode shows a relaxed state, because the same figure has worked as a reaper, as a gleaner and as a grape harvester. The gleaner appears both in "To Autumn" and in "Ode to a Nightingale", which are related to the story of Ruth, implicit in the first poem. Suddenly, this advance implies the failure of the third stanza, whose quick rhythm is reduced so that we can perceive the cycle of the day, which represents in reality the seasons and human age. This process shows a complementary and circular vision, so human life recurs. This is the sense of the ode: maturity and failure concentrated at the same moment. The metaphorical vision that is evinced in "To Autumn" leads to death, which is represented by birds, whose meaning supposes a temporality image (Lott 1970: 79-80). If plenitude dominates the first stanza, such an impression disappears

later, since there are many terms, such as ‘careless’ and ‘granary’ (l. 14) or ‘the fume of poppies’ (l. 17), which indicate that death is near.

In contrast to Keats, the opium ingestion by Coleridge is easily demonstrable. In fact, the first time that *Christabel*'s author refers to this drug happens on November 1791 (Perojo Arronte 1998: 19-20), when he was twenty-one. Despite Hayter's opinion, the rhythm of “To Autumn” progresses according to the hemlock and other substances (like in “Ode to a Nightingale”) and so it tries to achieve the ecstasy, whereas wine and sleep (explicit in “Ode to a Nightingale” and in “To Autumn”) complete this paradigm. However, Keats could consume opium and laudanum, perhaps influenced by his work as an apothecary, whereas his friend Charles Armitage Brown showed a great interest in De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, as can be perceived in the letter addressed from Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats on 16th December 1821:

I forgot the last time I saw you to ask whether you could space me, the two London Magazines with the English Opium Eater' in. I want not them for myself, but Mr Brown [...] came for them the very day I sent them to you⁴.

The odes are conceived as a possibility of communication, so we must understand them as an integrated group, guided by a feminine conception. “To Autumn” establishes constant connections between Ceres' personality, broken down into three characters in the second stanza. Nevertheless, we must inquire whether the autumnal entity is identified with a woman or with a man. If the literary tradition maintains that this season is commonly related to masculinity, in Keats's ode we observe that Autumn can generate life, and this is a common quality in women. In the first stanza women are identified with Ceres (Booth 1970: 88), although this characteristic does not appear explicitly. The sun makes the earth fertile, so Ceres and Apollo consolidate this opposite process, whose development transmits a sexual and metaphorical vision. Nevertheless, Autumn means masculinity in Keats's “Apollo to the Graces”. This reflection implies that an ambiguous creature directs the poem:

My steeds are all pawing at the threshold of the morn:
Which of the fairest three
To-day will ride with me
Across the gold Autumn's whole Kingdom of corn?
(Keats 2001: 303, ll. 3-6).

Apparently, “To Autumn” is a poem that uses a sublime structure and whose style seems to transmit a feeling of peace. However, it is necessary to remember that “To Autumn” is separated from the *Spring Odes* by a season, since the composition we try to analyze was composed in September 1819. Therefore, the elements that Keats decides to use in “To Autumn” are also different. First, this poem is the only ode that does not contain this word explicitly, although critics have no doubts in this regard and they prefer to characterize the composition as such (Minahan 1992: 180). Furthermore, it is not possible to reduce the scheme to a simple description, because Keats's “To Autumn” chooses to

⁴ This letter (number eighteen) belongs to the *31 Letters from Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats*, whose collection is kept in the *London Metropolitan Archive* (item K/MS/02/049).

conceal its true meaning under a deceptive appearance. That is why its structure reflects a very elaborate model.

Even though we can establish some parallelisms and divergences between Keats's *Spring Odes* and "To Autumn", we must recognize that this last work dispenses with many resources appreciable in the other compositions. Although the dialectic structure shapes "Ode to a Nightingale" or "Ode on a Grecian Urn", we can confirm that therefore an aesthetic debate does not appear in "To Autumn" (Conti Camaiora 1993: 11), so Keats does not continue, at least explicitly, with its previous argument. What is more, "To Autumn" is related to "Ode on Melancholy", to such an extent that the first composition develops some characteristics associated to a melancholic state. Both poems suppose complementary visions about the same theme, but "To Autumn" represents a personification, so this last work seems more complex.

Keats decides to make the deities human, so they are replaced with the allusion to Ruth in the second stanza. After the first question, the reader is inclined to see three possible answers which are not incompatible, whereas the second line contains some variants. John Barnard comments that the centre of the composition appears in the first line of the third stanza ("Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?", l. 23), since it announces death (Barnard 1987: 138); except the gleaner, the entities may have a rest, but it is possible to understand that the feminine subject condenses a collective level, as we see in Isabella, Lamia or Madeline (Bate 1963: 39). That is why at the end of the poem a generational combination happens, since all the elements are joined focusing on their plenitude, because this last movement tries to show human aspirations, even though Kenneth Muir states that there is no identification between autumnal season and human life (Muir 1969: 74).

The first sequence that depends on the second line of the second stanza expects us to see a sexual image, in keeping with a perfect landscape. The feminine entity appears in a granary, with her hair fluttering in the wind, which is expressed explicitly in the 'w' alliteration: "Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind" (Keats 2001: 249, l. 15). A figure carrying a sickle prevails in the second stanza, which is composed of a feminine group. As a result of this system we can observe that the wheat fields recreate the myth of Ceres, whom we can see commonly painted with a poppy. The furrow of the second image alludes to the myth of fertility, which is present thanks to the fact that Ceres stays implicitly in the composition.

After the first stanza, the poem focuses fully on an autumnal perspective, as happened in Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and "Ode to the West Wind" (Bloom 1971: 433). If we decide to analyze "Ode to the West Wind" we will find some sections that show a great resemblance to "To Autumn", especially if we remember its first lines: "The trumpet of a prophecy! O, Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" (Shelley 1968: 579, ll. 69-70).

Keats expresses autumnal music in the syllabic games, so that the reader can see that the composition is moving, at the same time, towards fertility and death (Knight 1968: 300): 'fruitfulness' (l. 1), 'bless' (l. 3), 'careless' (l. 14), 'hours' (l. 22), 'sallows' (l. 28),

‘redbreast’ (l. 32). The day cycle coincides with eternity, with human life and with the seasons, so the last stanza acts like a tragic notice that reveals poetic suffering, but ‘the soft-dying day’ (l. 25) also has its own beauty, since fate hangs over all the creatures. Each season seems to reflect its own music, although the last stanza presents a great melancholy, especially if we focusing on birds, since their song shows sadness; they want to migrate, because Autumn comes.

The *-ing* forms can keep the structural essence of the poem, until their conclusion in ‘gathering’ (l. 33). Previously, such a destructive sensation is specified by particles like ‘[w]hile’ (l. 25), ‘[t]hen’ (l. 27) or ‘now’ (l. 31), which increase softly the negative sensations, since the onomatopoeic plenitude that we observe with the ‘m’ repetition at the beginning of the composition is absent (see Patterson 1979: 451): “For Summer has o’erbrimm’d their clammy cells” (l. 11).

The second line of the last stanza does not seem an adequate consolation, and the flowers that we can see in the first lines are replaced by clouds, which represent Winter and death, in spite of the fact that the gnats, the lambs and the hedge-crickets can continue with their harmony; it is necessary to remember “On the Grasshopper and Cricket”, whose content is directly related to “To Autumn”:

The poetry of earth is ceasing never:
 On a lone winter evening, when the frost
 Has wrought a silence, from the stove there shrills
 The Cricket’s song, in warmth increasing ever,
 And seems to one in drowsiness half lost,
 The Grasshopper’s among some grassy hills.
 (Keats 2001: 45, ll. 9-14).

If we think that there exists an evident relationship between Keats’s “To Autumn” and “On the Grasshopper and Cricket”, Bloom does not document that influence, perhaps because he prefers to study the similarities to Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight” (Bloom 1971: 434), since the redbreast appears in this last composition:

[...] 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; [...]
 (Coleridge 1967: 242, ll. 67-70).

Keats conceives death as representing a part of life in general, since from an imaginative point of view, human beings would not be capable to develop plenitude without it. It is true that Keats used many sources like Chatterton’s *Ælla*, but perhaps the author who wrote *Endymion* consulted also Virgil’s *Aeneid*, where we can find that the wind shakes the leaves of the trees, besides the migration of birds (Watts 1985: 139):

quam multa in siluis autumni frigore primo
 lapsa cadunt folia, aut ad terram gurgite ab alto
 quam multae glomerantur aues, ubi frigidus annus

trans pontum fugat et terris immittit apricis
(Virgil 1978: 54, ll. 309-12).

If the first two stanzas of Keats's "To Autumn" reflect a fine conception, the beginning of the third seems abrupt and ironic, because maturity, death and regeneration are related from an implicit point of view. Therefore this composition has been considered as one of the best nature poems in English literature, at the same level as Marvell's work entitled "The Garden" (Watts 1985: 141).

In spite of the fact that we can document some similarities between Keats's and Marvell's works, we must remember that in the end the conceptions are different, since Keats finishes his poem with the swallows, whereas the second author prefers to include these birds in the fourth stanza: "The swallows all have winged across the main" (l. 35). Otherwise, sadness is explicit in Marvell's "Autumn", but Keats chooses a more complicated option, since he only senses this solution like a possibility, so readers can understand his composition from different points of view, that is, there are some meanings. Although, "Autumn" only seems to admit an approach, to such an extent that the last line of his composition presents an exclamation.

On the other hand, perhaps the most well-known imitation of Keats's "To Autumn" appears in the first "Autumn" by Hood, although the structure of this last composition seems more elaborate, since it presents five stanzas, whose development is even related to Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode on Melancholy". Nevertheless, Hood notes explicitly that his composition is intended to be, in reality, an ode, whereas Keats does not write this term in his poem. In this sense, we can see that the line "Where are the songs of Summer?" (l. 9) with its variants "Where are the blooms of Summer?" (l. 18) and "Where are the pride of Summer [...]" (l. 23) constitutes a reply of Keats's "Where are the songs of Spring" (l. 23). Furthermore, the line "Where is the Dryads' immortality" (l. 27) seems an echo of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale", if we focus on "[...] Dryad of the trees" (l. 7) or on "Thou wast not born for death, immortal death!" (l. 61). So it is possible to continue with Keats's influences in Marvell's "Autumn", since critics think that the sequence "And honey bees have stored / The sweets of Summer in their luscious cells" (ll. 33-4) is inspired by the last lines of the first stanza of Keats's "To Autumn", which at the same time comes from Virgil: "[...] aliae purissima mella / stipant et liquido distendunt nectare cellas" (Virgil 1994: 246, ll. 163-4)⁵.

The descriptions that are shown in "To Autumn" can be related to a Romantic picture, in accordance to a frequent tradition in English poetry. We can see, for example, a study by Kroeber, which analyzes some connections between Constable and Wordsworth⁶. Following this perspective, critics such as Watts have evinced the relationship between "To Autumn" and Constable's *The Hay-Wain* (Watts 1942: 142), one of his most famous pictures, which actually belongs to the *National Gallery*. It is evident that there exists an association between these two works, but if we compare both we might conclude that the

⁵ See Virgil, *Geórgicas*, bilingual edition by Jaime Velázquez. Madrid: Cátedra, 1994.

⁶ Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Landscape Vision. Constable and Wordsworth*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975.

coincidences are merely spontaneous, since these compositions try to reflect rural life. That is why it is preferable to understand Keats's and Constable's works from an independent point of view. Nevertheless, Constable finished his picture in 1821, and Keats published his ode one year before, so the temporal difference is almost imperceptible.

While it is common to compare "To Autumn" and *The Hay-Wain*, perhaps there are more coincidences if we try to relate Keats's work to Constable's "The Cornfield". In any case, we believe that the apparent connections between "To Autumn" and Constable's picture must not be understood as such, since they represent typical motives. In short, "To Autumn" and Constable's pictures expose poetic emotions shown in tranquillity, in contrast to "Ode on a Grecian Urn".

"To Autumn" conceives some hopes in the first stanza, but they disappear little by little. It is true that the flowers can grow at the start of this season ("to set budding more", l. 8), even more than in Spring ("And still more", l. 9), but their presence seems deceptive. Keats increases plenitude thanks to the fact that he uses many substantives ('sun', l. 2; 'vines', l. 4; 'apples', l. 5; 'gourd', l. 7; 'kernel', l. 8) and infinitives ('to load and bless', l. 3; '[t]o bend', l. 5; '[a]nd fill all fruit', l. 6; '[t]o swell [...] and plump', l. 7) related to a positive sense. The English poet whom we study wants to reflect a perfect universe in his generalizations, which are embodied in generic substantives: 'To bend with *apples* the moss'd cottage-trees, / And fill *all fruit* with ripeness to the core' (Keats 2001: 249, ll. 5-6). Nevertheless, these chromatic sensations are increased in the text whether we study the reiterations ('fruit', ll. 4, 6; 'wind', ll. 15, 29; 'flowers', ll. 9, 18) and the connotations of the verbs, whose happiness disappears in the third stanza: 'the soft-dying day' (l. 25), 'the light wind lives or dies' (l. 29).

"To Autumn" reveals a formal experiment on account of lexical and syntactic paradigms (Pearce 1975: 14). If in the "Ode to Psyche" or in the "Ode to a Nightingale" Keats used a subjective point of view, on the contrary in "To Autumn" Keats achieves a great objectivity, although the poet himself stays behind Autumn (Vendler 1973: 603). In fact, Keats joins sadness and happiness in "To Autumn", to such an extent that his poetry now is identified with a perfect serenity⁷. Then, Keats's *great odes* represent his finest work⁸, although we can discuss the order of them (Waldoff 1985: 99). The connection between life and death that Keats tries to establish in the poem is very suggestive, so the elements which we have analyzed suppose a metonymy of it. The three stanzas constitute an integrated group, in which readers may see the different phases of existence, represented

⁷ See Robert Gittings, *John Keats: The Living Year*. London: Heinemann, 1978.

⁸ I have completed my PhD Dissertation on John Keats's great odes from a comparative approach focusing on the English romantic context. In such an atmosphere one must know the identification between 'beauty' and 'truth'. This ambitious connection justifies Keats's great odes and their *annus mirabilis* (1819)—besides Keats's vocation as a poet—, and that is why we find a multitude of references, especially the classic poets (this term is understood without a chronological perspective), but also minor poets, frequently unjustly ignored or slighted, without forgetting the influence on Spanish authors. Yago Rodríguez Yáñez, *La propuesta lírica de John Keats. Belleza y verdad: Interpretación, antecedentes e influencias de las "great odes"*. Supervised by Dr Jesús Varela Zapata. Santiago de Compostela: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2006.

by birth, maturity and death. Therefore, the last stanza comes to show natural decline, whose intervention marks the start of Winter thanks to the fact that we can feel fragile sounds, generated by birds and gnats.

Keats uses a particular syntax in "To Autumn". So, there are verbs like 'swell' or 'plump' (l. 7) which in theory show an intransitive character, but in the composition present a transitive nature. At the same time, we find many verbs whose meaning is related to a plenitude process ('load', 'bless', 'bend', 'fill', 'swell', 'plump') that need their respective substantive ('vines', 'cottage-trees', 'fruit', 'gourd', 'hazel-cells'), which are accompanied by 'with' (Patterson 1979: 450).

English romantic writers refer to Shakespeare's works. Keats is no exception, thus, there also exists a relation between "How like a Winter" (XCVII) and Keats's "To Autumn" (Vendler 1983: 234):

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!
(Shakespeare 1971: 1119, ll. 1-3).

Apart from Shakespeare's echoes, it is common to note the influences of Milton's "Il Penseroso" and *Paradise Lost* on Keats's "To Autumn". In fact, the argument of this last composition shows many coincidences with the Keatsian poem. Both texts refer to the morning, whereas the reader can feel the activities which the creatures must realize every day. Perhaps Keats wrote the second stanza of "To Autumn" according to this Miltonian scene, although these farm works are traditional topics in nature poetry:

Awake, the morning shines, and the fresh field
Calls us, we lose the prime, to mark how spring
Our tended plants, how blows the citron grove,
What drops the myrrh, and what the balmy reed
How nature paints her colours, how the bee
Sits on the bloom extracting liquid sweet
(Milton 1968: V, 675-6, ll. 20-25).

It is obvious that we may find some antecedents with regard to Keats's "To Autumn", but not only in the poetic paradigm. We can also explore Vivaldi's concerto entitled *The Four Seasons* (1725) or Poussin's picture *Quatre Saisons* (1660-1664), besides other very diverse influences (Furst 2002: 3). Following this perspective, the representation of the four seasons assumes a European character, whose birth perhaps appears in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and continues with Thomson's *The Seasons*. Nevertheless, the first English romantic lyric who wrote about this tradition was William Blake in his *Poetical Sketches* (1783). In this work, Blake presents an individual voice in his quartet of short poems, entitled, respectively, "To Spring", "To Summer", "To Autumn" and "To Winter", so the seasons constituted a recurrent topic during this period. On the other hand, Lamartine, a great French poet, composed "Les saisons", a work that belongs to his *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*. In spite of the fact that many poets write about the seasons, we think that they prefer to choose Autumn, because its character seems ambiguous and not

clear, as we can read in Keats's "To Autumn", characterized commonly as a 'mellow fruitfulness'.

Autumn embodies human experience, which entails that many poets like Baudelaire, Verlaine or Rilke achieve a 'paradigm shift', according to Furst, since they modify the traditional perspective. However, with the arrival of Modernism, the authors increase, unconsciously, the Keatsian metaphor, because Autumn reflects a perfect identification with human existence (Furst 2002: 11). Therefore, the new aesthetics do not show a change of the powers of the mind, and the perception and treatment of Autumn evokes a romantic description of it. For example Wordsworth conceives this season as a serene understanding. Romantic autumnal vision does not merely imply a fine relationship between the poetic mind and nature, since such a requirement shows, at the same time, an existential crisis, but Keats's poem, on the contrary, elaborates a rupture in relation to the first *great odes*. If Wordsworth's "September 1815" evokes an external perception, Keats proclaims a particular harvest in his composition, although he does not leave the historic contemplation, something that is evinced implicitly in the ode. On the one hand, Wordsworth's poetry tries to distance him from the composition, whereas Keats invokes a more classic and instinctive point of view, given that both "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "To Autumn" must be understood as correlative functions of beauty and death. Nevertheless, Keats's compositions denote a different interaction with nature, since "To Autumn", despite its objectivity, assumes, in fact, a more personal voice than Wordsworth's text.

Whereas Keats's "To Autumn" achieves to merge imagination and purity, in the sense that the words chosen are the finest available, a writer such as Alexander Pope participates in the composition focusing on symmetry rather than on his imaginative contents, as happens in his third pastoral, entitled "Autumn"⁹. We can establish an evident parallelism between Keats's "To Autumn" and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, which shows a contrast between all the seasons, but the portrait is not ambiguous, since the 'sickle' (l. 8) refers to a man, whereas in "To Autumn" Keats prefers a woman:

Then came the *Autumne* all in yellow clad,
As though he ioyed in his plentious store,
Laden with fruits that made him laugh, full glad
That he had banisht hunger, which to-fore
Had by the belly oft him pinched sore.
Upon his head a wreath that was enrold
With eares of corne, of euery sort he bore:
And in his hand a sickle he did holde,
To reape the ripened fruits the which the earth had yold
(Spenser 1966: VIII.30, 403, ll. 1-9).

The terms used by Spenser are very similar to Keats's words, but in this terrain it seems difficult to note an influence, since the description of nature requires a definite semantic field, represented by 'store' (l. 2), 'fruits' (l. 3), 'reape' (l. 9) or 'ripened fruits' (l. 9), such as we can see in both works. Precisely this last sequence comes from Edgar's

⁹ See Alexander Pope, *Pope's Poetical Works*. Bristol: J. Gladding & Co., 1836.

speech in Shakespeare's *King Lear*: "Ripeness is all" (Shakespeare 1971, V.ii, 938, l. 11). On the other hand, Keats admits Miltonian teaching in his work, since there are connections between the Book V of *Paradise Lost* and "To Autumn". Milton uses 'store' (l. 322), 'ripe' (l. 323), 'gourd' (l. 327) and 'sweet kernels' (l. 346), whereas in "To Autumn" we can find 'ripeness' (l. 6), 'gourd' (l. 7), 'sweet kernel' (l. 8) and 'store' (l. 12), which are similar to the Milton's terms.

To conclude, I will say that "To Autumn" can be interpreted from multiple points of view, since this poem can accept historic, social and politic visions, besides an aesthetic approach. Keats is able to show his communion with Autumn, and this same season is able to depict many variants, so he recreates plenitude focusing on an autumnal time. So Keats prefers to personify this season, to such an extent that all the elements apparently assume great vitality. In the first stanza abundance takes place with constant parallelisms and repetitions, which seem to culminate in the bee's activity. The second stanza needs a tripartite scheme, since an ambiguous creature can be carelessly sitting, asleep, or even on the alert. In the last stanza readers must guess that Autumn is identified with decline, whose creatures play the part of a child who cries for the loss of his mother. These fragile sounds establish a link between sadness and happiness, since, in short, Spring and Autumn are related and nature expresses an implicit melancholy in "To Autumn". In fact, Keats decides to present a metonymic nature with the last animal scene.

According to an opinion widely held among critics, "To Autumn" is considered as the most perfect of Keats's odes. Its structure is remarkable for its serenity, contrary to "Ode to a Nightingale" or "Ode on a Grecian Urn", but its function cannot be understood as an independent composition. Keats's odes make up a meditated group in which we can perceive some connections, so it is not convenient to analyze them from a separate point of view; on the contrary, they must be studied in accordance with beauty and truth, which represent Keatsian ideals that belong to imagination.

In "To Autumn" beauty cannot disappear, in spite of the fact that Winter comes. Nevertheless, Keats's universe is not real, although during the composition such a discourse seemed true. The gnats, who in principle represent insignificant beings, indicate frustration next to a series of oppositions. Finally, we have new hopes, since regeneration appears in the swallows' flight.

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