The argument has been made, and it will be made further here, that “To Autumn” by John Keats is the most nearly perfect lyric poem ever written in the English language. That is quite a claim, one which is easier made when we disregard the self-centered solipsistic stance that there can be nothing like secure standards by which to judge accomplishment in art, which would consequently suggest that the best poem is simply the poem one likes the best. If, in fact, you believe that to be true, then go back to grade school, start your reading life anew, and get Mommy ready to put some kisses on that psychic ouchy you will endure when you discover that your uninformed relativism is just another manifestation of ignorance.

Let’s entertain Seamus Heaney’s entertaining quip—one which he himself paraphrased from Auden—that “poetry is our way of breaking bread with the dead...and if that is so, then meter and rhyme are our table manners.” Surely we must acknowledge that poetry is language at its highest degree, and that formal poetry—which sets for itself the demanding requirements of meter, rhyme, or stanzaic arrangement—is to free verse what a symphony is to jazz (or, in more evil moments, to a jingle for Bob Baker Chevrolet). Both are music, but one is attained through structure, discipline, years of study, and in response to the long tradition of music that has become before; and while jazz may be expressive, experimental, improvisational, and highly authentic, writing a symphony is one of the hardest artistic feats to accomplish, and there are as few who can do it as there are those who can write a great lyric poem. If jazz musicians and vers libre poets are enthralled with spontaneity and the unfettering of the imagination, the formal verse poet worships at the temple of decorum, and believes that challenge, risk, and the immense probability of failure are the prices imposed on any chance for sublimity.

A first, and then another reading of “To Autumn” convinces us that Keats has become a writer with a supreme ear for the elegant interplay between meter and natural speech rhythms. The iambic pentameter is confident, smooth, and provides the framework for the deceptively simple speech with which Keats evokes the bounty of harvest time and the transitory quality of life. Every line follows a regular iambic norm, and where there are metrical substitutions, they are purposeful, effective, and provide rhythmic counterpoint and reinforcement for the semantic statement of the words. Trochaic
substitutions in the first foot occur in line one of the first stanza--by way of emphatic introduction--and only again in lines twelve, thirteen, seventeen, eighteen, and twenty in the second stanza. These many trochees in this middle section serve to lend a slow and sated ponderousness to the meter, which is thus perfectly suited to the mood of luxuriant and soporific abandon ascribed to the personified Autumn throughout the stanza:

...Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook  
Spare the next swath and all its twiné’d flowers... (17) (18)

And there are skillful ripples and surges throughout the pentameter structure where natural speech patterns struggle and dance with the metrical norm. Ever the visualist, Keats forces us to imagine a groaning apple tree, mossy and laden, seemingly ready to burst with an abundance of fruit and life: This vision is sonically underscored in the third and fourth feet of line five, where a pyrrhic foot (or “scud”) is followed by a ponderous spondee:

...To bend with apples the mossed cottage trees... (5)

We also here recall that in the fourth stanza of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” Keats alludes to a village that is not featured on the urn, but which belongs to the province of imagination. A similar invitation to the reader’s imagination is also performed here in line five of “To Autumn”: The “cottage”--and we can see it--does not exist in the poem, but is somewhere out of the picture, though nearby. Above all, Keats in his prime--during the Miracle Spring of 1819--is a poet whose most astonishing gift may well be his subtle power of evocation, and his ability to stir the sympathetic imagination of the reader.

There are several other examples of master craftsmanship in the versification of “To Autumn, ” and in Keats’ use of assonance especially:

...Thou watchest the last oozing hours by hours... (22)

Which reminds us both of Poe’s hypnotic fascination with repeated vowels and also of Shakespeare: “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow...” Both metrical interest and sound quality conspire with superb effectiveness in line twenty-five:

While barré’d clouds bloom the soft-dying day... (25)

The mid-position trochee decelerates the rhythm, as does “bloom,” which once again reminds us of the effect Poe attempted (unwisely) in “Ulalume:” The difference
between Poe and Keats--in one sense Romantic soul-mates but in every other sense different--is that Poe sacrifices sense for sound, while Keats blends them in a self-sustaining amalgam of high art. So too, the “cloud” of gnats in line twenty-seven is duplicated on the page with the build-up of monosyllabic words:

...Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn...

The “sinking” of the gnats corresponds to the “sinking” of the day, and is metrically echoed by a “sinking” pyrrhic foot in the second position of line twenty-nine:

...Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies...

And once more and at last, the final lines of the poem contain what can be called--although some prosodists might consider the skipping syllables in “gathering” to be valued as one unaccented syllable--an anapest, where the twitter of the birds is echoed in the skipping rhythm, where the “w” sound is repeated with the effect of birdcalls, and where “twitter in the skies” acoustically amplifies the exact imaginative vision of a dying sky filling with swallows and gathering dusk:

...The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

That quality of Keats which is most astounding in his finest work--and the quality which has caused him most frequently to be compared to Shakespeare--is his entirely original diction and the seeming effortlessness of his syntax and phrasing. One reads many lines by many poets, not often with a sense of outright cliché or perception of plagiarism, but with a feeling that here is staleness of expression, or there the result of an uninspired, derivative mind. In the great poems of 1819, each line, ascription, image, and the cadence which controls them, seem novel and a delight to read; Keats has found his voice, and it is a fresh one melded to an unerring eye. The syntactical qualities of Keats’ later verse can only be appreciated by numerous readings aloud: The studies that have focused on his use of participles-as-adjuncts, or his use of enjambment and the Miltonic model, do not adequately address the near-Renaissance innocence he brings to description:

...To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells...
...For Summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cells...

are clearly Shakespearean, while:
...Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind... (15) 
...Spares the next swath and all its twinéd flowers... (18)

are lines that seem familiar yet striking, conforming to some Romantic ideal, yet the bold utterance of an original mind.

The rhetorical structure of “To Autumn” is one of shifting focus, and the rhetorical tone varies between high artifice and gentle conversation. The interest the poem holds for us is partly a function of how the poet’s voice ranges in not only content but emotional quality as well. The first stanza is but a long apostrophe unconcluded with any main clause: The season is only praised, described, evoked, and any argument that is contained surely rests in the sheer fecundity of the harvest, which itself ranges in scope from the cosmic (“Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun”) to the microcosmic, the “clammy cells” of the bees. The immeasurable richness of the harvest is expressed in connection with the implied richness and delight of a near-concluding life: All that can be done has been done; the fruits of labor are everywhere; there is placid celebration in the luxury afforded by autumn’s bounty.

Autumn personified—and we may call her Ceres, Demeter, and to my mind is visually best recalled as Titian’s Flora—is addressed in the middle stanza, and she is portrayed as a now-passive observer, bereft of any but the most languorous energy by her labors of production. We see her in her many guises as a harvest deity: overseeing the reaping, the preparation for a vintage-pressing, the winnowing and storing away of grain. Autumn’s beauty is not that of desire but of fertility; her unmistakable sexuality is that of placid motherhood rather than promiscuity. She is virtually exhausted, slumping over in mid-furrow, sitting mute and careless right on the granary floor, and her exhaustion is that of the artist at the end of his labor. We ourselves remember the feeling of drowsiness in a late summer or fall afternoon, when the air is warm, yet carries a suggestion of change; when the light is rosy in the fields, but the shadows are growing richer and elongated. It is here that Autumn now drowses and watches, and by personifying his vision in the middle of the poem, Keats conjures flesh and a visceral depth where lesser poets would make do with clichés or abstraction. There is nothing Spenserian, nothing emblematic about Autumn in stanza two: Our vision of the goddess is secure and complete through the poet’s chosen details, which supply enough energy for the imagination to do the rest.

In the last stanza, Keats’ changing yet relentless focus keeps Autumn in the foreground, but now the vision has an auditory element. And Keats raises the nobility of his vision by switching from a conversational and descriptive voice to one of high rhetoric: “Where are the songs of Spring?” After protesting that “...thou hast thy music too,” Keats enlists the many voices of the season—gnats mourning in the shade; the
bleating of lambs, now full-grown; crickets and birdsong—to further increase our sense of realistic immediacy with that most memorable and yet abstract sensory experience, sound. It is again curious to turn to Poe, whose Usher considered music to be the most perfect of all arts because it is the most abstract and the most removed from the sensory world. But for Keats, the music of autumn must first be given a backdrop for us to feel its effectiveness, and so before allowing his voices of the season to take over, he provides us with a tableau of barred clouds, the rosy hue on the stubble of the harvested fields, and it is in the context of this panorama that once again Keats forces the reader to move from a contemplation of the immense and cosmic to the particular and intimate. It is with the memory of the soft-dying day a few lines above that the poem ends, with its subtle coda of swallows darting like spirits in a closing sky.

What is most ineffable but equally moving about “To Autumn,” however, is the philosophical progression towards an acceptance of mortality and cosmic resignation that is the theme of the poem. By 1819—he was to die in 1821 at the age of 26—Keats was surely aware of his impending annihilation. “To Autumn” is not a recrimination, not an indictment, though Keats’ bitterness at the arbitrary inequity of life is elsewhere evident. Instead, “To Autumn” is a celebration, not only of the season itself, but a celebration of philosophical maturity, dignified acceptance, and the bittersweet knowledge that the season and its particulars which the poet celebrates might be his last on earth. Just as Spring has its youth, its pipes and lascivious deities, its fresh music, its litany of promises and potential, Autumn—here being an analogue for the end of the artist’s life—has on her palette the deeper shades of completion, maturity, earth tones, and the sometimes cloying colors of fruition. “Ode to a Nightingale” calls for the annihilation of the artist by his art; “Ode on Melancholy” trumpets the attractions of despair; “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is a meditation on the connection between art and reality; but “To Autumn,” the last of the great Odes and certainly the last major poem of Keats’ life and career, is a remarkable effort of control, stoic detachment, relentless observation, in perfect complement with what can be fairly described as a final harvest of aesthetic ecstasy.

Returning to the opening issue of this essay, that “To Autumn” is the most nearly perfect poem in the English language, the arguments for this proposition and against it—or those which would hold up another poem as a contender—must consider technical achievement, originality of cadence, diction, phrasing, vision, thematic interest and richness, and the integrity of Keats’ philosophical and aesthetic gestalt. There is this too: John Keats’ final major fruit as a poet came after his long and intense struggle to understand poetry, to study the past poetic tradition for models and inspiration, to forge new paths and abandon them again, but never to surrender to the expected or be placated by whatever there might be in a poet’s mind that bespeaks the comfortable and mundane. Keats found in his pursuit of Beauty a Truth that is as hauntingly austere as it
is warm and vivid, and each additional reading of “To Autumn” makes us greater disciples of his inimitable genius.

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