



The Ode 'To Autumn' as Ecosystem

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*The world was void,
The populous and the powerful – was a lump,
Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless –
A lump of death – a chaos of hard clay.
The rivers, lakes, and ocean all stood still,
And nothing stirred within their silent depths.*

Byron 41

[BYRON'S POEM] 'DARKNESS' begins . . . with the stress of weather. The poem opens, 'I had a dream, which was not all a dream. / The bright sun was extinguished.' Does it stretch credulity too far to suppose that the first clause of the second sentence follows from the second clause of the first sentence? That the extinguished sun was not all a dream? Might the origin of the poem not be the absence of sunshine in June, July and August 1816? . . . [The] eruption of Tambora volcano in Indonesia in 1815 killed some 80,000 people on the islands of Sumbawa and Lombok. It was the greatest eruption since 1500. The dust blasted into the stratosphere reduced the transparency of the atmosphere, filtered out the sun and consequently lowered surface temperatures. The effect lasted for three years, straining the growth-capacity of organic life across the planet. Beginning in 1816, crop failure led to food riots in nearly every country of Europe. Only in 1819 were there good harvests again. . . . [Byron's] poem darkly narrates a history in which war temporarily ceases as humankind pulls together in the face of inclement weather but is then renewed on a global scale as a result of the famine consequent upon the absence of sunlight. The global struggle for subsistence leads ultimately to the extinction of mankind. . . . When we read 'Darkness' now, Byron may be reclaimed as a prophet of ecocide. What, I want to ask here, is the legacy of romanticism in our age of ecocrisis? . . . The weather is the primary sign of the inextricability of culture and nature. [Michel] Serres points out in *Le Contrat naturel* that peasants and sailors know the power of the weather in ways that scientists and politicians do not. Romanticism

*From 'Living with the Weather', *Studies in Romanticism*, 35(3), 1996.

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THE ODE 'TO AUTUMN' AS ECOSYSTEM

listens to the wisdom of sailors and peasants – of [Coleridge's] Mariner and [Wordsworth's] Michael. It challenges the modern separation of culture from nature. Romanticism knows that, in [Bruno] Latour's phrase, a delicate shuttle has woven together 'the heavens, industry, texts, soul and moral law' (Latour 5).

A living reading of Keats's 'To Autumn', in the age of global warming, must begin with the knowledge that we have no choice but to live with the weather. Just as the meteorological reports for July 1816 are the key context for Byron's 'Darkness', so our understanding of 'To Autumn' should begin with the knowledge that the weather was clear and sunny on 38 out of the 47 days from 7 August to 22 September 1819, and that in the week of 15–22 September temperatures were in the mid-sixties, whereas in the corresponding week in each of the three previous years they had been in the mid-fifties. Remember the meteorological and consequent agricultural pattern: the terrible summer and failed harvest of 1816, bad weather and poor harvests continuing in 1817 and 1818, then at last in 1819 a good summer, a full harvest, a beautiful autumn.

'To Autumn' is not an escapist fantasy which turns its back on the ruptures of Regency culture; it is a meditation on how human culture can only function through links and reciprocal relations with nature. For Keats, there is a direct correlation between the self's bond with its environment and the bonds between people which make up society. The link is clear in the letters he wrote around the time of the composition of 'Autumn'. At the end of August 1819, he writes to Fanny Keats:

The delightful Weather we have had for two Months is the highest gratification I could receive – no chill'd red noses – no shivering – but fair Atmosphere to think in – a clean towel mark'd with the mangle and a basin of clear Water to drench one's face with ten times a day: no need of much exercise – a Mile a day being quite sufficient – My greatest regret is that I have not been well enough to bathe though I have been two Months by the sea side and live now close to delicious bathing – Still I enjoy the Weather I adore fine Weather as the greatest blessing I can have.

(Keats, *Letters* 2.148)

The measure of human happiness, Keats suggests, is not a matter of government decree, is not determined by the high politics of Fat Louis and Fat Regent, to whom he refers dismissively later in the same letter. There are more basic necessities: good weather, clean water to wash and bathe in, unpolluted air in which to exercise. Keats's residence in Margate and the emergent discourses of sea-bathing and ozone are crucial here.

Then on 21 September 1819 in his journal-letter to George and Georgiana Keats (*Letters* 2.208–9) he moves easily from human bonds ('Men who live together have a silent moulding and influencing power over each other – They interassimilate') to the bond between self and environment ('Now the time is beautiful. I take a walk every day for an hour before dinner and this is generally my walk'). The walk is described: it traces a path from culture to nature, from cathedral and

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college to meadow and river. Between theorizing about interassimilation and describing his walk in the fresh autumn air, Keats writes 'I am not certain how I should endure loneliness and bad weather together.' Life depends on sociability and warmth: in order to survive, our species needs both social and environmental networks, both human bonds and good weather.

'To Autumn' is a poem about these networks. That it is a weather poem is manifest from the passage describing its genesis in the other famous letter which Keats wrote on Tuesday, 21 September 1819, to J. H. Reynolds:

How beautiful the season is now – How fine the air. A temperate sharpness about it. Really, without joking, chaste weather – Dian skies – I never lik'd 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. I hope you are better employed than in gaping after weather. I have been at different times so happy as not to know what weather it was.

(*Letters* 2.167)

The consumptive has no choice but to gape after weather. I believe that the key context for this passage is the poor air quality of the years 1816–18 – Byron's 'perpetual density', the effect of Tambora. Health, wrote Keats in his late letters, is the greatest of blessings, the cornerstone of all pleasures (2.289, 306). When his body was finally opened by Dr. Clark, Dr. Luby and an Italian surgeon, 'they thought it the worst possible Consumption – the lungs were intirely destroyed – the cells were quite gone' (Severn to Taylor, *Letters* 2.379). Air quality is of the highest importance for the weak of lung. Keats was killed less by the reviewers than by the weather. I suspect that when he refers to the 'different times' at which he was 'so happy as not to know what weather it was,' he is thinking nostalgically of the time before the bad weather of the immediate post-Tambora years which tragically coincided with the first taking hold of his pulmonary tuberculosis. The good summer and clear autumn of 1819 very literally gave him a new lease of life.

'To Autumn' itself is a poem of networks, links, bonds and correspondences. Linguistically, it achieves its most characteristic effects by making metaphors seem like metonymies. Mist and fruitfulness, bosom-friend and sun, load and bless, are not 'naturally' linked pairs in the manner of bread and butter. One would expect the yoking of them to have the element of surprise, even violence, associated with metaphor. But Keats makes the links seem natural: the progression of one thing to another through the poem is anything but violent or surprising. The effect of this naturalization within the poem is to create contiguity between all its elements.

The world of the poem thus comes to resemble a well-regulated ecosystem. Keats has an intuitive understanding of the underlying law of community ecology, namely that biodiversity is the key to the survival and adaptation of ecosystems. Biodiversity depends on a principle which we might call *illusory excess*. In order to

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THE ODE 'TO AUTUMN' AS ECOSYSTEM

withstand the onslaught of weather an ecosystem needs a sufficient diversity of species to regenerate itself; species which serve no obvious purpose in one homeostasis may play a vital role in changed environmental circumstances. Their superfluousness is an illusion; they are in fact necessary. The wild flowers in the second stanza of 'To Autumn' are an excellent example: in terms of the agricultural economy, the flowers which seed themselves in the cornfield are a waste, an unnecessary excess, but under different environmental conditions they could be more valuable than the corn. The wild-flower which Keats names is the poppy. I believe that this is chosen not only for aesthetic effect – the red dots contrasting with the golden corn, as in Monet's *Wild Poppies* – but also as a reminder of medicinal value. 'The fume of poppies' makes us think of opiates against pain and care. Spare the next swath with your reaping-hook, says Keats, and you might just gain medical benefit; spare the remaining rainforests, say ecologists, and you might just find a vaccine against AIDS among the billions of still unstudied plant species you would otherwise annihilate.

The ecosystem of 'To Autumn' is something larger than an image of agribusiness. Agribusiness sprays the cornfields with pesticides, impatient of poppies and gnats. Agribusiness removes hedgerows, regarding them as wasteful; 'To Autumn', in contrast, listens to hedge-crickets. The poem is concerned with a larger economy than the human one: its bees are there to pollinate flowers, not to produce honey for humans to consume ('later flowers for the bees', not 'bees for human beekeepers').

But the imaginary ecosystem of the text is also something larger than a piece of descriptive biology. There are not only links within the biota – flower and bee, the food-chain that associates gnat and swallow – but also links between the discourses which the modern Constitution sought to separate out. The poem not only yokes external and internal marks of biological process (the visible bending of the apple tree, the invisible swelling of the gourd), it also yokes community and chemistry (bosom-friend and sun), physics and theology (load and bless), biology and aesthetics (a link which we may express through the two halves of the word which describes the closing images of the poem: bird-song). And crucially, it refuses to sign the Cartesian constitution which splits apart thinking mind and embodied substance. In contrast to Keats's earlier odes, there is no 'I' listening to a nightingale or looking at an urn: the self is dissolved into the ecosystem. In his journal-letter, Keats wrote of his ideal of interassimilation between men; in the poem he is interassimilated with the environment. Indeed, environment is probably the wrong word, because it presupposes an image of man at the center, surrounded by things; ecosystem is the better word exactly because an ecosystem does not have a center; it is a network of relations.

Insofar as the poem does have a centre and does anthropomorphize, it is distinctively female. The human figures in the central stanza – winnower, reaper, gleaner and cider-presser – embody traditional woman's work. Yet they are not in process of 'working over inorganic nature' in the manner of Marxian man. They are suspended, immobile. The winnower's hair is balanced in the wind, the gleaner balances herself in equilibrium with the eddies of the brook, the reaper is asleep

under the influence of the poppy, the cider-presser is winding down in entropic rhythm with the oozings.

In contrast to those feminists who seek to denaturalize traditional images of masculinity and femininity, ecofeminists reappropriate and celebrate the idea of woman's closeness to the rhythms of mother earth. A line of work beginning with Sherry Ortner's 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?' and best exemplified by Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature*, posits direct links between Enlightenment science, masculinity and technology on the one hand, the exploitation of women and the exploitation of the earth on the other. Keats's images of wise female passivity and responsiveness to nature are prototypically ecofeminist.

If we return to the letter to Reynolds with this in mind, we will notice that it offers more than a weather report. It mediates between meteorology and mythology. The unblemished sky is compared to Diana, mythical goddess of chastity. This allusion fits with the poem's feminized relationship with nature. Keats would have read in Lempriere's *Classical Dictionary* that the poppy was sacred to Diana. Several of the goddess' traditional functions and associations suggest that she may be regarded as a spirit of ecological wholeness: she was supposed to promote the union of communities; she was especially worshipped by women; she seems originally to have been a spirit of the woods and of wild nature who was subsequently brought into friendly accord with early Roman farmers. But this latter shift also reveals the illusion upon which the poem is based. Diana, with her associations of woodland, chase and pool, is preeminently the presider over a pre-agrarian world. The meadows in which she runs are never harvested. Chastity is an ancient image of untouched-virgin-land. It might be said that a more appropriate presider for the poem would be one of Diana's opposites, the fertile Cleopatra: 'he ploughed her and she cropped,' says Enobarbus of Caesar and Cleopatra. The male farmer ploughs, the female land is cropped.

In both letter and poem, Keats celebrates the stubble, that which remains after the cropping and the gathering. This land is worked-over, not virgin. The aestheticized still-point of the poem occurs at the moment when humankind has possessed and emptied the land. But where in the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' the objective correlative is a human artwork which is celebrated precisely because it transcends time, 'To Autumn' offers only a momentary suspension upon the completion of harvest. At the close of the poem, the gathering swallows and the full-grown lamb are already reminding us of the next spring. Famously, Keats gives up on the earlier odes' quest for aesthetic transcendence, embracing instead the immanence of nature's time, the cycle of the seasons.

'Accidentally or knowingly,' writes Serres, 'the French language uses only one word, *temps*, to speak both of the time that ticks by or flows, and of the weather produced by the climate and by what our ancestors called meteors' (*Le Contrat naturel* I; trans. McCarren). 'To Autumn' is a poem of both time and the weather. In this respect, it mediates between exterior and interior ecologies. Ecosystems evolve in time through the operation of weather; the ecology of the human mind is equally dependent on the two senses of *temps*. Our moods are affected by the weather. Our identities are constituted in both time and place, are always shaped by both memory

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THE ODE 'TO AUTUMN' AS ECOSYSTEM

and environment. Romantic poetry is especially concerned with these two constitutions. It is both a mnemonic and an ecologic. Weather is a prime means of linking spatiality and temporality – this, I suggest, is why so many major romantic poems are weather poems. A romantic poem is a model of a certain kind of being and of dwelling; whilst always at several removes from the actual moment of being and place of dwelling in which it is thought and written, the poem itself is an image of ecological wholeness which may grant to the attentive and receptive reader a sense of being-at-home-in-the-world.

Let us read 'To Autumn' backwards. The poem ends with an at-homeness-with-all-living-things (swallow, robin, cricket, sheep, willow, gnat). The final stanza's river and distant hill are not virgin ecosystems, but they are less touched by humankind than is the intermediate farmed environment of the middle stanza. Where the poem has begun is with an intensively managed but highly fertile domestic economy in a cottage-garden. The movement of the poem is thus . . . from culture to nature. But the movement *through* the poem, with its intricate syntactical, metrical and aural interlinkings, is not one which divides the culture from the nature. There is no sense of river, hill and sky as the opposite of house and garden. Rather, what Keats seems to be saying is that to achieve being-at-homeness-in-the-world you have to begin from your own dwelling-place. Think globally, act locally. . . .

Michel Serres asks: 'In politics or economics, by means of the sciences, we know how to define power; [but] how can we *think fragility*?' (*Le Contrat naturel* 71; my trans. and emphasis). I ask myself: what might be the legacy of romantic poetry for us now? And it occurs to me that the answer to Serres' question is the answer to mine: romantic poetry can enable us to think fragility. Byron's 'Darkness' proposes that when ecosystems collapse, human bonds do so too. Keats's 'To Autumn' [is a] thinking of our bonds with each other and the earth, [a] thinking of fragile, beautiful, necessary ecological wholeness.

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