**Sample English seminar. AEL Showcase. 12 March 2021.**

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**Sample critical readings of Keats, ‘To Autumn’**

**‘Formalist’ readings**:

• Helen Vendler (1983): an attempt at reparation for loss, for the inevitable and necessary depletion of harvest, in offering plenitude.

• Fry (1986): Fry’s argument is that the poem is ‘a-historical’ but in a completely different manner from that argued by McGann (see below): ‘it scarcely seems pertinent to say that “To Autumn” is an evasion of social violence when it is so clearly an encounter with death itself’ (216); even if the poem ‘were about the harvest, it could scarcely be a celebration of plenty. Amid stubble-fields, dried-up cottage gardens, and sounds that are humanly intelligible only insofar as they seem mournful, a requiem for plenitude, the sense complete the eclipse of the season by turning to the high frequencies of an empty sky’ (217). [Note: Fry v Vendler: Fry sees death and depletion; Vendler sees acceptance and plenitude.]

**Some examples of ‘close’/ formal readings:**

Throughout: ‘The sounds and consequent tone of the poem, both the long vowels and the alliterative reliance on the double-’l’ … together create the ‘fruitfulness’ of the poem: ‘fill’, swell’, ‘o’er-brimmed’, ‘furrow’, ‘winnow’, ‘swallows’ – to name but a few …. the language of fulness” (Mahoney 456).

Stanza 1: ‘Though the form may be that of surmise, the impression is one of steady action.’ (Vendler 250)

Philosophical acceptance of process? But …. ‘many poetic and linguistic devices that complicate assent to process, inviting but refusing it, as if to deny or mitigate its painful effects. St 1 infinitives – never find completion in a finite verb. The final image of st 1 implies but also seems to postpone the coming of winter …’ (Sheats 97)

Stanza 1 line 10: ‘The line that exposes the ironic effect of summer’s generosity is made to conspire  in this generosity, by forming a couplet that prolongs the stanza’s closing cadence (cdecDDe), Here, in Keats’s one readjustment of the May stanza [the stanza of 10 lines used in the earlier 1819 odes], meter functions as a formal, nonsemantic analogue to the passage of time.’ (Sheats 98)

Stanza 2: The agricultural rhythm is of reaping, gleaning, threshing, but here: threshing, reaping, gleaning: ‘a sequence invented, I believe, to show the difficulties of presenting an inactive harvest and one imbued with pathos’. (Vendler, 251)

Stanza 3: ‘Sentences shorten, finite verbs multiply. After the magnificent display of stanza two, personification subsides (in *choir* and *mourn*) and vanishes in the last four lines, where an absolutely literal diction enacts acceptance of what is and will be. Twice displaced from its destined victims, verbal forms of “die” (25, 29) are applied harmlessly to immortal things, the day and the wind, in a delicate euphemism we sense as protective, merciful and unavailing’. (Sheats 98)

**A ‘biographical’ reading (of sorts)**

• Turley (2003): that the poem dramatizes ambivalence about maturity (Turley focuses particularly on ‘odd and difficult-to-reconcile phrases’ such as 'maturing sun', 'close bosom-friend', 'small gnats', and 'full-grown lambs'); that the poem is an address ‘to’ autumn wishing to defer, rather than a description ‘of’ autumn. Turley also argues that that ambivalence is intimately bound up with political opposition.

**The debates about politics ‘in’ or ‘of’ the poem**

•Jerome McGann (1979): escapist fantasy, refusing its own context of political repression and suffering.

• William Keach (1986) and Nicholas Roe (1997): read in the context of Leigh Hunt’s ‘Autumn’ section of his ‘Calendar of Nature’ (*The Examiner*6 Sept 1819) in which autumn offers a ‘lesson on justice’, the poem sees the generosity and abundance of nature as an admonishment of injustice.

Summer & August 1819

14 August: Keats settles in lodgings in Winchester, Hampshire

16 August: the ‘Peterloo Massacre’: 11 killed and hundreds wounded.

6 September: Leigh Hunt’s ‘Calendar of Nature’ in *The Examiner* quotes Spenser and Shelley and suggests that Autumn offers a ‘lesson on justice’ in distributing plenty to all.

11 – 15 September: Keats in London, during which visit he sees Henry Hunt (‘Orator Hunt’) return to London with crowds turning out to welcome him (13 September).

18 September: Keats’s letter-journal to his brother George writes of radical hopes of political progress as inexorable (e.g. the ‘seed of opposition to Tyranny was swelling in the ground till it burst out in the French Revolution’) and of the 13 Sept events in London.

19 September: Keats’s walk inspires him to write ‘To Autumn’.

21 September: Keats writes of his intention to support himself by becoming a political journalist.

• William Keach (1986) and Andrew Motion (1997): the labour of the bees is compared to the plight of Scottish labourers Keats had seen on his walking tour (summer 1818); gleaning had been made illegal in 1818 (v Vendler, who writes of the hedonistic pleasures of the bees).

• Bennett (1991): that the poem should be read in relation to agrarian politics (the Corn Laws of 1815, enclosures, the condition of the rural poor): e.g. compares the ‘capital accumulation of stanza one’ and ‘work and its negation in stanza two’ (344).

• Turley, Archer and Thomas (2012): study the poem alongside land lease records, Robbins’s guidebooks to WInchester and other local sources to show that the poem resists a concerted ‘capitalist’ reimagining of Winchester and its agricultural heritage, and also takes its place in a wider contemporary debate around labour and ‘idleness’, surplus and profit.

• Richard Cronin (2018): ‘It may be that the distinctive character of the poems of 1820 is achieved because Keats has found a way to pursue at once his two contradictory ambitions, to write poems that achieve a formal perfection that releases them from the contingent, and yet poems that also contrive to speak to the contingent world in which we all of us live our lives. It is not political poetry exactly, but it is a poetry that worries more searchingly than most about how far political poetry is possible’ (115).

**Ecocritical readings**

• Jonathan Bate (2000): a meditation of the dependency of human culture on links and reciprocal relations with nature. ‘Linguistically, it achieves its most characteristic effects by making metaphors seem like metonymies. Mist and fruitfulness, bosom-friend and sun, load and bless - not ‘naturally’ linked (like bird and wings). 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’ (104); ‘Death, when combined with ripeness, [Keats] persuades himself, is not to be mourned, as long as the harvest is safely stored. (265).

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