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English Restored: John Keats's *To Autumn*

.I.

‘Yesterday I went to town: I called on Mr. Abbey; he began again (he has done it frequently lately) about that hat-making concern—saying he wish you had hearkened to it: he wants to make me a Hat-maker’.¹ So John Keats reported in March 1819: Richard Abbey, his guardian, saw no future for him in writing poetry and, for different reasons, F. W. Bateson was inclined to agree.

While Bateson didn’t envisage hat making as an option, he was convinced that if Keats had lived longer he ‘would have abandoned poetry’.² His argument was that Keats’s poetic vision could not be fulfilled, because it was self-cancelling: in ‘Sleep and Poetry’ Keats had anticipated a ‘nobler life’ of writing that would ‘find the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts’ (123-5), only to deflect his poem away from humanity in pursuit of a celestial ‘charioteer’, ‘shapes of delight’ and ‘ever-fleeting music’ (138, 141); following a similarly evasive trajectory, ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ eventually admits what ‘Sleep and Poetry’ had overlooked — that fancy is a ‘cheat’, a ‘deceiving elf’ (ll. 73-4).³ The weakness of the ‘sole self / deceiving elf’ rhyme, noted in this journal by Kingsley Amis, signalled for Bateson a much deeper crisis: ‘the “vision” of the “Ode to a Nightingale” was, [Keats] had decided, only a “waking dream”’, and consequently he ‘had in fact condemned himself to poetic silence’.⁴ Disillusioned, ill, Keats gave up on *Hyperion* roughly one hundred years before

Wilfred Owen wrote ‘Strange Meeting’—a poem that for Bateson ‘can perhaps be said to carry on where “The Fall of Hyperion” ... had left off’.⁵

Keats’s ‘precocious maturity’ and incipient silence required further explanation. ‘The turning-point seems to have been the winter of 1817-18’, Bateson says: ‘*Endymion* (finished Nov. 1817) is adolescent, *Isabella* (finished April 1818) is adult’.⁶ In Bateson’s view something had occurred during that winter to turn Keats from *Endymion*’s ‘slippery blisses’ (ii. 758) to *Isabella*’s ‘poison-flowers’ (l. 104), from ‘milky sovereignties’ (ii. 759) to ‘vile with green and livid spot’ (l. 475). Visiting Oxford in autumn 1817, Bateson says, Keats had ‘run loose’ and caught syphilis; the ensuing shock that this caused was comparable in its effect to the traumatically ‘forced growth’ that Wilfred Owen endured in the trenches: it transformed ‘a very minor poet to something altogether larger’.⁷

Perhaps Bateson was right: on 8 October 1817 Keats said that he had taken a ‘little Mercury’, and a letter to Dilke on 21 September 1818 reveals that he was still dosing himself a year later.⁸ Then again, winter often brought changes for Keats. He emerged from the winter of 1815-16 as ‘Mr. Keats’, a Surgeon at Guy’s Hospital, and from the following winter as the author of *Poems, by John Keats*. The winter of 1818-19 saw him rally from his brother’s death to draft *The Eve of St Agnes*, the first great poem of ‘the living year’. That said, so intense has been the scrutiny of Keats’s short life, each episode can seem momentous and a single month more like the passage of a year; one can easily overlook the multiple haphazard contingencies that impelled his life and from which he created his poems. Helen Vendler’s inspired close reading of ‘To Autumn’ makes almost no mention of the poem’s occasion⁹,

whereas for Bateson a text and its multiple contexts were ‘indissolubly’ related; ‘anything that could be seen or heard ... was grist to [Wordsworth’s] poetic mill’.¹⁰ These are difficult matters for all readers: does it help to know that ‘I stood tip-toe’ revisits scenes Keats had known as a schoolboy, or that images in the ‘Nightingale Ode’ and ‘To Autumn’ were culled from Leigh Hunt’s ‘Calendar of Nature’? A poem’s contexts can be short and long-term, immediate or delayed in their effects. For Keats it might be what he read that day in *The Examiner*, or had been thinking about for several years; as Miriam Allott reminds us, ‘at the end of his brief writing career’ Keats was still trying to ‘make out’ what he thought and felt.¹¹ Part of that process involved looking back, in order to ascertain how far he had advanced – a trait captured in a note prefaced to his first collection: ‘[THE Short Pieces in the middle of the Book, as well as some of the Sonnets, were written at an earlier period than the rest of the Poems]’.¹² His book was thus a report on progress so far, deliberately arranged (it has long been realised) to form a narrative that pointed confidently to future promise and poetic fame.¹³

So, after that auspicious first book, was Keats really self-condemned to silence less than three years later? Bateson argued that Keats had hoped to write poetry that would offer a ‘healing influence’, a ‘social function’ — an ambition that proved impossible for him ‘given the social setting and the contemporary condition of the English language’.¹⁴ In this essay I argue that on the threshold of winter in 1819 the ‘condition of the language’ itself proved to be a remarkable resource for Keats and that, as Miriam Allott suggested, he was continuing to reflect upon and respond creatively to an earlier period as he set about remaking himself once again as a poet.

On 1 December 1816 Hunt's 'Young Poets' article had introduced Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley as leading lights of a 'new school' of poets; '[t]his sealed [Keats's] fate', a fellow student recalled, 'and he gave himself up more completely ... to Poetry'.¹⁵ If that was so, the process of 'sealing' proved extraordinarily protracted: when Hunt first met Keats on 19 October, an article about 'Young Poets' didn't immediately leap into the press; it took Hunt six weeks to pick up his pen and announce that he was 'restricted by time to a much shorter notice than we could wish'.¹⁶ This may have been true — as a journalist he was continually pressured, yet his weekly copy was usually on time, carefully crafted and strategically located. His 'Young Poets' article appeared when and where it did for good reasons, although these have never been fully investigated or explained.¹⁷ While Keats's genius soon carried him beyond Hunt, the influence of Hunt's article proved durable—as 'To Autumn', a poem literally poised before winter, reveals. In September 1819, I suggest, Keats seems to have been on the threshold of another winter transition that would have moved him on from the great achievements of the previous months. No longer in pursuit of fading music, he began to sound a 'genuine English Idiom in English words' in a poem that Vendler has described as 'ascetic, scaled down, softened in tone, and wonderfully consistent'.¹⁸ The same words might well describe Seamus Heaney's reports on poetic survival and growth in *Wintering Out* —a volume of 'languagey' poems, like 'To Autumn', creatively in touch with the 'language underlay'.¹⁹

1816 was as momentous as the year of Waterloo. Allied victory had returned the *ancien régime* to Paris, and Louis XVIII would now rule as ‘legitimate’ monarch of France — ‘not for his private and personal advantage’, proclaimed *The Times*, ‘but for the general good of Europe, and for the inexpressible good of France’.²⁰ Many were much less confident of these goods, among them John Keats; his six lines ‘Written on 29 May, the Anniversary of Charles’s Restoration, on Hearing the Bells Ringing’ reminded ‘[i]nfatuate Britons’ that Charles II had ‘trampled on the rights of the people’.²¹ In a pamphlet *On the State of Europe*, the Irish lawyer George Ensor reflected similarly on ‘the *legitimacy* of kings’, and the unhappy ghosts raised by reopening constitutional disputes.²² For *The Morning Chronicle* and *The Examiner* ‘the fashionable doctrine of [Bourbon] legitimacy’ was at odds with England’s Bill of Rights; “‘legitimacy’ ... will infallibly be laughed to scorn’, Hunt pronounced, ‘as the English laughed it to scorn in the person of James the 2d’.²³ Hunt’s Shakespearean phrase was double-edged, echoing the Apparition’s advice to Macbeth: ‘laugh to scorn / The pow’r of man, for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth’ (IV. i. 79-81). Hunt had recently done time for libelling royalty, and this hint of Shakespearean ambiguity was prudent.

On 29 September 1816 William Hazlitt reviewed Ensor’s pamphlet for the *Examiner*. ‘This little work has real stuff in it; and the right sort of stuff’, he begins, and proceeds to quote numerous extracts calculated to catch Keats’s eye.²⁴ Ensor’s claim that “‘some [kings] have ... renounced the right divine’”, cited by Hazlitt, may be echoed in Keats’s verse epistle ‘To Charles Cowden Clarke’ — the schoolmaster who had taught him ‘all the sweets of song’:

The grand, the sweet, the terse, the free, the fine
 What swell'd with pathos, and what right divine.

(ll. 54-5)

Perhaps this was a coincidence? Keats needed a rhyme for 'fine'; 'right divine' did the trick and, anyway, he was probably recalling Pope's line, "The RIGHT DIVINE of kings to govern wrong".²⁵ 'To Charles Cowden Clarke' is dated 'September, 1816'; written as much to the moment as Hazlitt's review, the poem nevertheless lifts itself out of that context to recall how Clarke had explained the different genres of poetry. Keats's linguistic touchstone may be significant; he uses the old English word 'swell' quite often in his poetry—'river's crystal swell' in his first published poem 'To Solitude' (l. 5), 'mighty swell' in 'On the Sea' (l. 2), and '[to] swell the gourd' in 'To Autumn' (l. 7). The verbal form is ancient, dating from *Beowulf* ('swelan ond swellan'²⁶) and probably earlier, suggesting perhaps that Keats's wish to discriminate the types and pleasures of English poetry had sent him to its source in much older forms of the language. Hazlitt's review also quotes Ensor's observation that 'the *Georgium Sidus* is ... honoured by a philosopher with a King's name', an allusion to Herschel's famous compliment for George III. Appearing just days before Keats wrote of 'a new planet' in his sonnet on 'Chapman's Homer' (l. 10) this reference to Herschel's discovery is intriguing—and particularly so when, just five lines later, Hazlitt goes on to notice Ensor's remark that the seventeenth-century French poet Nicolas Boileau had 'outraged the King with his adulation'. Boileau also makes an appearance in 'Sleep and Poetry' (written October-December 1816) where as a mere 'handicraftsman', inflated by thoughts of divine right, he wears 'the mask / Of Poesy' (ll. 200-1).

Hazlitt's *Examiner* review may have given Keats a start for several trains of thought around the time that he first met Hunt, connecting quarrels about political legitimacy with questions of poetic and linguistic authenticity. The review had also allowed Hazlitt to announce another article in preparation: a 'Literary Notice to the editor of the *Times* newspaper', occasioned by an editorial welcome in *The Times* for 'legitimate rule' in France.²⁷ 'This paper is a nuisance which ought to be abated', Hazlitt begins, then sets about *The Times* and its editor in three furious paragraphs. Merging Milton's image of Satan 'close at the ear of Eve' with Fuseli's gothic masterpiece 'The Nightmare', Hazlitt presents a scene of gothic horror: 'now that they have restored this monstrous fiction ... ['legitimate rule'] sits squat like a toad or ugly nightmare on the murdered corpse of human liberty, stifling a nation's breath, sucking its best blood, smearing it with the cold deadly slime of nineteen years' accumulated impotent hate, polluting the air . . . and choking up the source of ... life'.²⁸ Gathered into this image is the 'devilish art' that links Satan with 'nightmare'²⁹—a word that in Hazlitt's time denoted 'suffocation or great distress experienced during sleep', sometimes attributed to supernatural causes.³⁰ Such was the effect of reviving a defunct *ancien regime*: the sensations of choking, suffocating pressure signalled the onset of a '*political nightmare* by which ... vigour and energy are paralysed'.³¹ Running out of space and determined that his own voice would go on being heard, Hazlitt signed-off with '*To be continued*' and dispatched his manuscript.³²

On Sunday 27 October the *Examiner* announced Hazlitt's piece on *The Times*, although five weeks would elapse before publication.³³ In print its three paragraphs extended across four full columns and immediately beneath them Hunt inserted his

article on ‘Young Poets’: ‘Many of our readers ... have perhaps observed ... a new school of poetry rising of late, which promises to extinguish the French one that has prevailed among us since the time of Charles the 2d’.³⁴ While appearing to offer a genial ramble through some recent poetry, Hunt had deliberately hooked his article onto Hazlitt’s by identifying the ‘French’ school of poetry with another Restoration: the English one of 1660.

This was not, however, fresh news. The poetic prequel to Waterloo had begun in the eighteenth century, when Joseph Warton and Thomas Gray claimed that an ‘Italian School’ in English poetry (derived from Dante and Petrarch, and extending from Chaucer to Milton) had been ousted by a ‘French model’ that enforced metrical regularity.³⁵ Others repeated the point: Wordsworth, for instance, regretted that ‘our elder writers’ were sidelined by ‘metrical writers utterly worthless and useless’; Hazlitt compared Milton’s and Dante’s eloquence with ‘the regular sing-song of Pope’; and Hunt sought to deflect ‘the lingering influence of the French school ... to that of the English’ in poetry of ‘fancy, and feeling, and all-surviving Nature’.³⁶

All of this shows that readers had long been primed to expect a resurgence of English poetry: Francis Jeffrey had associated Wordsworth with ‘a new school of poetry’ in 1807 and more recently Hazlitt, this time reviewing *Christabel*, had mentioned ‘the new school, or, as they may be termed, the wild or lawless poets’.³⁷ This review from September 1816 was Hazlitt’s first sketch towards an article on ‘Mr. Coleridge’s Lay-Sermon’, published in *The Examiner*, that would eventually grow into ‘My First Acquaintance with Poets’³⁸—the essay that identified England’s ‘wild and lawless poets’ with the former generation of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). With

those inspired achievements long past, as Coleridge's *Christabel* volume reminded readers, in December 1816 the moment was right for Hunt 'to notice three young writers, who appear to us to promise a considerable *addition of strength* in the new school'—Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Hamilton Reynolds, and John Keats.³⁹

So Hunt's 'Young Poets' article stemmed in part from a convergence of eighteenth-century revaluations of English poetry, arguments about the Bourbon restoration, and Hazlitt's reflections on *Lyrical Ballads* and the 'new school'. More immediate prompts had come from the young poets themselves. Keats's sonnet 'To Solitude' was published in *The Examiner* on 5 May 1816, Charles Cowden Clarke had given Hunt copies of Keats's poems, and Shelley had recently forwarded a manuscript of 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty'. Hunt had met Keats several times, and was in touch with Shelley by post. Then, on 3 November, *The Examiner* carried this announcement: 'The SONNET on CHAPMAN'S HOMER by J. K. and a selection from [Reynolds's] the *Naiad*, the earliest opportunity' (evidently at this point still envisaged as poems for separate publication, not as components for an article).⁴⁰ There had therefore been plenty of time for Hunt to reflect upon these young poets; unlike Reynolds, who was already well published, Shelley and Keats were virtually unknown and in need of an introduction that *The Examiner's* editor could easily supply. Yet, with all of this material assembled, Hunt paused—and when 'Young Poets' eventually appeared, some six weeks after he first met Keats, it was as a supplement to Hazlitt rather than a spontaneous announcement of poetic talent.

Reflecting on 'a new school of poetry', Hunt ponders the double nature of 'restoration': both a return to, or of, the past and also a renovation for the future. As

The Examiner's readers glanced from Hazlitt's article to Hunt's, they encountered two contrary tendencies: at Paris the reinstatement of an old and outworn regime, in England a poetry of youth and renewal. Alert to different senses of 'restoration', Hunt goes on: 'In fact, it is wrong to call it a new school, and still more so to represent it as one of innovation, its only object being to restore the same love, of Nature, and of *thinking* ... which formerly rendered us real poets'.⁴¹ By 'real poets' Hunt meant Chaucer, Spenser and Shakespeare—the English tradition. Having introduced Shelley and Reynolds, Hunt turns to 'the youngest of them all, and just of age . . . JOHN KEATS': 'he has not yet published any thing except in a newspaper; but a set of his manuscripts was handed us the other day, and fairly surprised us'.⁴² To show why, Hunt quoted in full Keats's sonnet 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer':

ON FIRST LOOKING INTO CHAPMAN'S HOMER

MUCH have I travel'd in the realms of Gold,
 And many goodly States and Kingdoms seen;
 Round many western Islands have I been,
 Which Bards in fealty to Apollo hold;
 But of one wide expanse had I been told,
 That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
 Yet could I never judge what men could mean,
 Till I heard CHAPMAN speak out loud and bold.
 Then felt I like some watcher of the skies,
 When a new planet swims into his ken:
 Or like stout CORTEZ, when with eagle eyes
 He stared at the Pacific,—and all his men
 Looked at each other with a wild surmise,—
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Oct. 1816.

JOHN KEATS.

With his ‘eagle eyes’ Cortez appears as another poet of new school ‘wildness’, his men silent in awed anticipation. The implication was clear: by attending to Chapman, Homer and what ‘formerly rendered us real poets’, Keats had set his eyes ambitiously on future achievement—indeed, the word ‘promise(s)’ appears four times in Hunt’s article, re-echoed in its final sentence with ‘poetical promises’. The contrast with Hazlitt’s suffocating year of broken promises could hardly have been more striking.

‘Young Poets’ was decisive for Keats because it did so much more than draw attention to three youthful writers. Prompted by Hazlitt, Hunt had distilled sixty years of revisionist thinking about English poetry, and then singled-out Keats as the young poet of most potential: ‘just of age ... *he has not yet published anything*’ (my emphasis). Within weeks Keats would leave Guy’s Hospital to ‘gain [his] Living’ by writing.⁴³

Hunt had given Keats an introduction that the young poet was unlikely to forget (it was referenced and quoted in reviews of Keats’s poetry, favourable and hostile, for years afterwards). Fourteen months later Hunt’s ideas informed Keats’s regard for ‘the old Poets’ and (after two years) his confidence that he would be ‘among the English Poets’.⁴⁴ ‘Sleep and Poetry’, the most ambitious poem in his first book, contains a history of poetry akin to Hunt’s and describes Hunt’s house with its portraits of King Alfred and the Polish hero Kosciusko—a suggestive juxtaposition of an old patriot king and a modern nationalist.⁴⁵ Hunt also provoked the ‘Cockney School’ attacks and, with his roster of ‘Young Poets’, had hit upon a formula that has since been copied countless times. The later eighteenth century had seen a ‘juvenile

tradition’ of prodigies dating from Beattie’s *Minstrel* (1771) and including the earliest works of Wordsworth and Coleridge, Southey and Hemans, and Hunt’s own first collection *Juvenilia: or, A Collection of Poems Written Between the Ages of Twelve and Sixteen* (1801).⁴⁶ Thomas Chatterton and Robert Burns both died years before their time, and each became a potent figure in Romantic myth — yet no one had placed them in a coterie or ‘school’ of young writers. Hunt was the first to announce a concerted movement of poetical youth, and scores of poetry magazines and web sites now routinely announce the most recent arrivals: ‘Young Poets Network’, ‘Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award’, ‘Hippocrates Young Poets Prize’, ‘The Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize’, ‘Woodbridge Young Poets’, ‘Barbican Young Poets’, ‘Suffolk Young Poets’, ‘Shropshire Young Poets’, and ‘Top 12 Young Poets from the USA’. Dozens more could be added.

Energetically competing for prizes and awards, these latest generations bear out Hunt’s suggestion that young poets begin ‘with something excessive, like most revolutions’, before settling to a steadier aspiration to ‘original fancy’.⁴⁷ In describing Keats’s ‘Chapman’s Homer’ sonnet, Hunt had claimed that one of its rhymes was ‘incorrect’ — literally, ‘excessive’⁴⁸ — and left readers to spot which one:

But of one wide expanse had I been told,
 That deep-brow’d Homer ruled as his demesne;
 Yet could I never judge what men could mean,
 Till I heard CHAPMAN speak out loud and bold.

According to the *OED* two pronunciations of ‘demesne’ are available: ‘dimayn’ or ‘dimeen’. Hunt slyly recommended that this apparently ‘incorrect’ rhyme ‘might easily be altered’—he does not say *corrected*—which is true, if one changes the pronunciation or alters the spelling to ‘domain’. But none of those alterations modify the word’s role as a rhyming or half-rhyming holdfast for the sequence running from ‘seen’ and ‘been’ through ‘ken’ and ‘men’ to its marvellous closing line: ‘Silent, upon a peak in Darien’. Part of the sonnet’s power arises from its juxtapositions of sound and silence, and quibbling on ‘demesne’ lends unequivocal emphasis to what follows: ‘I heard CHAPMAN speak out loud and bold’. The revised version of the sonnet that Keats published in his 1817 volume shows how he responded to Hunt’s idea: ‘Yet could I never judge what men could mean’ was removed, and replaced by a line of unquestionable genius—‘Yet did I never breathe its pure serene’—eight inspired, negatively-capable words with which Keats found his voice as a poet.⁴⁹

As Hunt had recognised, the sonic energy of Keats’s language—‘equally powerful and quiet’⁵⁰—often strikes readers most immediately and powerfully; Seamus Heaney recalled that his own first encounters with Keats’s poetry left him feeling ‘overawed by the dimensions of the sound’.⁵¹ The opening of the ‘Nightingale Ode’ is exemplary in this respect, its powerfully vowelled cadences commanding assent before the strange, contradictory symptoms of ‘aches’, ‘drowsy’, ‘numbness’ and ‘pains’ can be fully registered. Likewise, in ‘To Autumn’ the phrases ‘moss’d cottage-trees’ and ‘a sweet kernel’ seem ripened by an original English music, as if Keats was responding to what T. S. Eliot termed the ‘auditory imagination’: that is, ‘the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and

forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end'.⁵² A pre-conscious feel for language had been evident in Keats's childhood game of 'rhym[ing] to the last word people said', as later in his 'half at Random' impulses of composition.⁵³ Equally, Eliot's restorative communication with forgotten origins — with what 'formerly rendered us ... poets' — can be overheard in Keats's Shakespearean roundelay 'O Sorrow', in 'Robin Hood', 'Lines on the Mermaid Tavern', 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', and in almost every word of 'To Autumn', a poem that Walter Jackson Bate said was 'almost instinctive' in its choice of diction.⁵⁴ If Keats's poetic language was 'almost instinctive', achieved 'half at Random', another half at least was consciously and artfully made—as Keats's response to 'Young Poets' in 'To Autumn' suggests.

.III.

Settled in lodgings at Winchester in September 1819, Keats was confronted by ill-health and, as he thought, his failure to attain 'to the height'.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, he was astonishingly energetic: he worked on *The Fall of Hyperion*, wrote a fifth act for his tragedy *Otho the Great*, finished *Lamia*, revised *The Eve of St. Agnes*, began to study Italian, dashed to London and back, then thought of becoming a journalist. The season had lyrical qualities too: 'I always somehow associate Chatterton with autumn', he told John Hamilton Reynolds: 'He is the purest writer in the English Language. He has no French idiom, or particles like Chaucer—'tis genuine English Idiom in English words ... English ought to be kept up'.⁵⁶ Donald Davie thought that for Keats 'to speak of pure or impure *language* is ridiculous'⁵⁷ — which might be so, but that is not quite what Keats said. He does claim, somewhat oddly, that Chatterton is the '*purest*

writer in the English Language' in that his poetic language seemingly did not mingle English and French idioms as Chaucer had done.

Reynolds had been one of Hunt's 'Young Poets', and could be expected to notice that Keats was drawing on what Hunt's article had said while pointing to much earlier French infiltrations of English poetry. Keats's idea of Chaucer reflected the fact that the French language had come in with the Norman Conquest of 1066, as was often noted in studies of the English language with which Keats was apparently familiar. Joseph Priestley's influential *Rudiments of English Grammar* (1761), for example, frequently cites and cautions against 'French idiom'. 'If I have done any essential service to my native tongue', Priestley writes,

I think it will arise from my detecting in time a very great number of *gallicisms*, which have insinuated themselves into the style of many of our most justly admired writers; and which, in my opinion, tend greatly to injure the true idiom of the English language ... I do not suppose, that they designedly adopted those forms of speech, which are evidently French, but that they fell into them inadvertently, in consequence of being much conversant with French authors.⁵⁸

Priestley's book was written and marketed for use in schools such as Clarke's academy at Enfield, where Keats tells us 'french [was] cramme'd down our Mouths, as if we were young Jack daws at the mercy of an over-feeding Schoolboy' ('over-feeding' applies to cramming or gorging; the schoolboy does both).⁵⁹ Keats's schoolmaster John Clarke was 'on familiar terms with Dr. Priestley', so it is quite possible that his *Rudiments of English Grammar* was used in teaching.⁶⁰ While

Keats's school explains his awareness of 'French idiom' and 'particles'⁶¹, his claim that Chatterton's poetry was an 'English idiom' echoed one side in the debate about the 'Rowley Poems'. Siding with those who connected Chatterton's language with 'very early English poetry' and 'ancient writers',⁶² Keats linked him with pre-Norman, Anglo-Saxon culture and, in Winchester especially, with the achievements of King Alfred as a poet, translator, and inventor of the English nation — achievements that had been celebrated by the founder of Enfield school, John Ryland, in his *Life and Opinions of Alfred the Great* (1784), a book that Keats probably read.⁶³

In 'To Autumn', composed at King Alfred's city, Keats gathers a hoard of old, monosyllabic English words as if to demonstrate how 'English ought to be kept up':

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
 Spare 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 shallows, borne aloft
 Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
 And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
 Hedge-cricket sing; and now with treble soft
 The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
 And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

Keats begins his first stanza in a 'French idiom': like the word 'autumn', from the Old French *autompne*, 'season' was derived from *seson*; the word had been used by Chaucer in his 'Prologue' to the *Canterbury Tales*: 'Bifil that in that seson on a day, /

In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay ...'.⁶⁴ As a former resident of Southwark who possessed an old 'black Letter Chaucer', Keats would have noted this.⁶⁵ What follows in 'To Autumn', however, is in effect a restoration of the English language as Keats deploys a host of words long predating Hunt's French and Italian 'schools' and fourteenth-century verbal imports such as 'maturing', 'conspiring', and 'gourd'.⁶⁶ Sun, bless, thatch, eve, moss, ripe, apple, swell, hazel, kernel, bee, warm, clammy, cell, winnow, reap, swath, brook, hook, cloud, gnat, sallow, bleat, bourn, hedge, croft, gather and swallow: these old English words are plain, pared down, strangely chastened components for a lyrical celebration of autumn's richness. The *OED* has hook, sallow, gather and swallow as the earliest, dating from as far back as c.700; hedge is slightly later, from 785; gnat and winnow are ninth-century words; sun, swath and brook are also dated to the late ninth century and first recorded, at Winchester, in King Alfred's translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. Bourn, one of Keats's favourite words meaning a stream or brook, can be traced back through Hamlet's 'undiscover'd country' (III. i. 79) to its first recorded use in William Langland's fourteenth-century alliterative poem *Piers Plowman*: 'I was wery forwandred and wente me to reste / Under a brood banke by a bourne syde'.⁶⁷

Given the occasion of 'To Autumn', its question 'Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?' may be addressed to the season itself or, as John Barnard has suggested, to some kind of 'androgynous tutelary spirit'.⁶⁸ In view of the poem's place of composition, perhaps 'thee' may also invoke one of Keats's shadowy presiders—the old poet-king of Winchester. He had known about King Alfred since his schooldays, mentions him in 'To Kosciusko', 'To George Felton Mathew' and 'To Charles Cowden Clarke', and smuggles his name into 'To Autumn' where 'half-

reap'd' forms an anagram of 'Alfred hap': Alfred's good fortune, good luck, success.⁶⁹ That Keats should have paired Alfred with the Polish nationalist Thaddeus Kosciusko is understandable; both were freedom fighters, and both were depicted in portraits at Hunt's house.⁷⁰ Relishing Kosciusko's generously alliterative, four-vowelled presence, Keats associated him—like Chatterton—with autumn: 'GOOD KOSCIUSKO! thy great name alone / Is a full harvest whence to reap high feeling ...'.⁷¹ While these opening lines of Keats's sonnet 'To Kosciusko' anticipate the 'granary', 'winnowing', 'gleaner' and 'stubble-plains' of 'To Autumn', their earnest of 'harvest' and 'high feeling' also made good on Hunt's recent praise: his sonnet 'To Kosciusko' was his first poem to appear in *The Examiner* (16 February 1817) since 'Chapman's Homer' in 'Young Poets' the previous December.

For Keats it seems that the onset of autumn in 1819 had revived a cluster of associations: Hunt's idea of a 'new school', inspired by what 'formerly made us poets'; the restoration of English poetry; and the bright autumnal constellation of Chatterton, Kosciusko and King Alfred. These associations were linked in various ways with Hunt's 'Young Poets' article and in September 1819 we can trace Hunt's influence as 'To Autumn' gathers and sounds its English words in conscious, or 'half at Random', affirmation of 'poetical promise'. Composed at the equinoctial mid-way between summer and winter, on the 19th day of the 9th month in the year 19, the poem holds its vocabulary in fine equilibrium, fusing a residual French idiom with English words from the age of 'the old poets' and earlier still –'monosyllabic and consonantal..., native in origin'.⁷² This extraordinary verbal ferment is sustained throughout, into the third stanza and up to the poem's final line, where those two ancient words 'gathering swallows' are reminders of continuity and 'the inevitable return of spring and renewal'.⁷³

In all of these ways the language of ‘To Autumn’ reveals Keats continuing to respond to and grow from Hunt’s ‘Young Poets’, the article that had done so much and so momentously at a time when discredited traditions had seemed likely to stifle the future. As Keats set aside *The Fall of Hyperion* he never once spoke of abandoning, or being deserted by, poetry; although autumn’s day is ‘soft-dying’, its language gathers and swells with as much imaginative and verbal vitality as anything Keats ever wrote. Transitional, announcing a new direction, ‘To Autumn’ speaks of much more to follow, rather than the ending that its poet had to endure.

¹ *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols.

(Cambridge, MA, 1958. rpt 1972), ii. 77. In the quoted passage Rollins’s square and curly brackets, denoting editorial emendations, have been removed. Abbey’s ‘hat-making concern’ may have been the business run by Thomas Mower Keats and Joseph Keats, brothers, at 14 The Poultry and 74 Cheapside—addresses known to the poet who in 1816-17 lived with his brothers at 76 Cheapside.

² Kingsley Amis, ‘The Curious Elf: A Note on Rhyme in Keats’, *Essays in Criticism*, 1.2 (April 1951), p. 191. F. W. Bateson, *English Poetry. A Critical Introduction* (London, 1952; third imp. 1961), p. 196.

³ *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (London, 1978). Unless indicated otherwise, Keats’s poetry is quoted from this edition.

⁴ Bateson, *English Poetry*, p. 222.

⁵ Bateson, *English Poetry*, pp. 220-21.

⁶ Bateson, *English Poetry*, p. 222 n.

⁷ Bateson, *English Poetry*, p. 222 n.; C. Day Lewis, 'Introduction' to *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* (London, 1931; 1963), pp. 11, 12.

⁸ *Letters of John Keats*, i. 171, 369.

⁹ Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge MA and London, 1983), p. 241.

¹⁰ F. W. Bateson, *Wordsworth. A Reinterpretation* (London, 1954), pp. vi, 83.

¹¹ 'Preface' to *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Miriam Allott (London and New York, 1970), p. xvi.

¹² *Poems, by John Keats* (London, 1817), [p. viii].

¹³ See Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge MA and London, 1963), p. 141 and Jack Stillinger, 'The Order of Poems in Keats's First Volume', in *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and other Essays on Keats's Poems* (Urbana, Chicago and London, 1971), pp. 1-13.

¹⁴ Bateson, *English Poetry*, pp. 221-2.

¹⁵ *The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers 1816-1878 and More Letters and Poems 1814-1879*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2nd edn., 2 vols. (Cambridge MA, 1965), ii. 211.

¹⁶ 'Young Poets', *The Examiner* (1 December 1816), p. 761. Hereafter, 'Young Poets'.

¹⁷ Robert Gittings describes 'Young Poets' as an 'ephemeral article [that] promises more than it fulfils'; *John Keats* (London, 1968), p. 99.

¹⁸ *Letters of John Keats*, ii. 167; Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats*, p. 279.

¹⁹ 'On the Books', Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones. Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London, 2008), p. 124.

²⁰ 'To the Editor of the *Times*', *Times* (3 August 1815), p. 2.

²¹ Robert Gittings, *John Keats*, p. 42; *Examiner* (17 April 1814), pp. 254-5.

²² George Ensor, *On the State of Europe in January 1816* (London, 1816), p. 4.

²³ *The Examiner* (12 May 1816), p. 300; (1 September 1816), p. 550; (14 July 1816), p. 438.

²⁴ 'Literary Notices, No. 13', *The Examiner* (29 September 1816), p. 617

²⁵ 'The Dunciad, in Four Books', iv. 188, ed. James Sutherland, *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, 11 vols (London and New Haven, 1939-69), v. 360.

²⁶ *OED*, 'swell', v, 1 a.

²⁷ See *The Times* (1 October 1816), p. 2.

²⁸ 'The Times Newspaper', *The Examiner*, 466 (1 December 1816), p. 760. For Satan and Eve, *Paradise Lost*, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London 1968, 1980), IV. 800.

²⁹ *Paradise Lost*, IV. 801, 808.

³⁰ *OED* senses A 1 a and 2 a. These early senses of the word 'nightmare' have been weakened in modern usage. The imagery could also suggest a bloated, leech-like form; however, as leeches were and are used with benign effect to treat various ailments, it seems unlikely that Hazlitt would associate leeches with the 'monstrous' entity depicted in his article.

³¹ 'Morning Post and Gazetteer', *The Morning Post* (13 Nov 1802).

³² Hazlitt published three further essays on 'The Times Newspaper' in *The Examiner*, on 15 and 22 December 1816, and 12 January 1817; the letter to the

editor signed 'Scrutator', published in the *Examiner* on 8 December 1816, was also from Hazlitt's pen.

³³ *The Examiner*, 461 (27 October 1816), 678; this issue also carried Hunt's attack on 'reckless advocates of Corruption and Divine Right'. A second announcement of Hazlitt's essay appeared in *The Examiner*, 464 (17 November 1816), 724.

³⁴ 'Young Poets', pp. 761-62.

³⁵ *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope* (London, 1756), p. x; *Poems of Gray, Collins and Goldsmith*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (London and Harlow, 1969), p. 170, note to line 66ff. For a survey of the argument, see James Chandler, 'The Pope Controversy: Romantic Poetics and the English Canon', *Critical Inquiry*, 10 (March 1984), pp. 481-509.

³⁶ 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems* (1800 and 1802)', in *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill, 21st-Century Oxford Authors (Oxford, 2010), p. 62; 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface', *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1974), iii. 79. 'The Round Table. No. 16', *Examiner* (20 August 1815), p. 541. 'Round Table. No. 2', *The Examiner* (8 January 1815), p. 27. Coleridge contrasts 'Pope and his followers ... in that school of French poetry' with the more varied English poetry of Warton and Bowles; *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 7, 2 vols. (London and Princeton, 1983), i. 18.

³⁷ Review of Wordsworth's *Poems, in Two Volumes*, *Edinburgh Review*, 11 (October 1807), 214-31; 'Art. II. *Christabel: Kubla Khan, A Vision. The Pains of*

Sleep. By S. T. Coleridge Esq. London. Murray, 1816', *Edinburgh Review*

(September 1816), pp. 58-67. See also 'Mr. Coleridge and the Edinburgh Reviewers', *The Examiner* (24 November 1816), pp. 743-4.

³⁸ 'Mr. Coleridge's Lay-Sermon', *Examiner* (12 January 1817), pp. 28-9; 'My First Acquaintance with Poets', *The Liberal*, 3 (1823). Hazlitt's *Edinburgh Review* article developed his short notice of Coleridge's *Christabel* volume, originally published in the *Examiner* (2 June 1816), pp. 348-9, without the reference to 'wild or lawless poets'.

³⁹ 'Young Poets', p. 761, my italics.

⁴⁰ *The Examiner*, 462 (3 November 1816), p. 694.

⁴¹ 'Young Poets', p. 761.

⁴² 'Young Poets', p. 761.

⁴³ John Taylor to Richard Woodhouse, reporting Richard Abbey's remarks, 20, 23 April 1827, in *The Keats Circle*, i. 307.

⁴⁴ *Letters of John Keats*, i. 224-5, 393, 394. See also John Barnard, 'Keats's "Robin Hood"', John Hamilton Reynolds, and the "Old Poets"', Warton Lecture on English Poetry, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 74 (1989), pp. 181-200, and especially p. 196: 'The difficulty for both Keats and Reynolds was that their own taste had been formatively influenced by Hunt, and remained very close to his. ... Consequently, when Reynolds and Keats tried in the course of 1817 and 1818 to separate their work from Hunt's, the differences are not, seen retrospectively, particularly well-marked'. It is worth adding that just two years and nine months elapsed between the publication of 'Young Poets' and Keats's composition of 'To Autumn' – considerably less than the undergraduate course in English at Oxford.

⁴⁵ See Jeffrey N. Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School. Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 103.

⁴⁶ See Laurie Langbauer, *The Juvenile Tradition: Young Writers and Prolepsis, 1750-1835* (Oxford, 2016).

⁴⁷ 'Young Poets', p. 761.

⁴⁸ *OED* 'incorrect, *adj.* ... **3.** Of style, action, etc.: Not in conformity with a recognized standard; improper, faulty'.

⁴⁹ Charles Cowden Clarke recalled Keats saying that the line 'Yet could I never tell what men could mean' [sic] 'was bald, and too simply wondering'. See Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, *Recollections of Writers* (London, 1878 rpt. Fontwell, 1969), p. 130. For Keats's subsequent use of the phrase 'serene domain', see *Hyperion*, i. l. 63.

⁵⁰ 'Young Poets', p. 760.

⁵¹ 'Mossbawn. 2. Reading' in *Preoccupations. Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London, 1978), p. 26.

⁵² 'Matthew Arnold', *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London, 1933), pp. 118-19.

⁵³ *The Diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, ed. W. B. Pope, 5 vols. (Cambridge MA, 1960), ii. 107; *Letters of John Keats*, i. 142.

⁵⁴ Walter Jackson Bate, *The Stylistic Development of Keats* (1945; London, 1958), p. 185.

⁵⁵ *Letters of John Keats*, ii. 147.

⁵⁶ *Letters of John Keats*, ii. 167.

⁵⁷ Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (London, 1967), p. 26n.

⁵⁸ *Rudiments of English Grammar, Adapted to the Use of Schools* (3 edn., London, 1772), pp. x-xi.

⁵⁹ *Letters of John Keats*, i. 155.

⁶⁰ *Recollections of Writers*, p. 5.

⁶¹ ‘You will be astonished to find how inferior [French] is to our native Speech’, he told his sister, and joined Hunt in recommending Italian as ‘full of real Poetry and Romance’; *Letters of John Keats*, i. 155.

⁶² *The Works of Thomas Chatterton. Containing his Life, by G. Gregory, D. D. and Miscellaneous Poems* (3 vols., London, 1803), i. cliv, clv.

⁶³ For King Alfred and the Romantics, see especially Lynda Pratt, ‘Anglo-Saxon Attitudes? Alfred the Great and the Romantic national epic’, in *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Donald Scragg and Carole Weinberg (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 138-56.

⁶⁴ ‘General Prologue’ to *The Canterbury Tales*, ll. 19-20, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd edn. (London and Oxford, 1974).

⁶⁵ *Letters of John Keats*, i. 276.

⁶⁶ *OED* has ‘mature’ partly from Middle French ‘maturer’; ‘conspire’ from French ‘conspirer’; and ‘gourde’ from the French ‘gourde’.

⁶⁷ ‘Prologue’, ll. 7-8, *The Vision of Piers Plowman. A Critical Edition of the B-Text*, introd. A. V. Schmidt (London, Melbourne, Toronto, 1978), p. 1.

⁶⁸ John Barnard, *John Keats* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 138.

⁶⁹ Pointed out by Brother Adrian Risdon of St. Cross Hospital, Winchester, following my talk on ‘Keats at Winchester’ to the Winchester Poetry Festival in October 2016.

⁷⁰ 'Sleep and Poetry', ll. 385-8.

⁷¹ Quoted from *The Examiner* (16 February 1817).

⁷² Bate, *The Stylistic Development of Keats*, p. 185.

⁷³ Barnard, p. 140.