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“A Disputant of the Landscape:” Redefining the English Landscape in “To Autumn”

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“**N**ow Morning from her orient chamber came, / And her footsteps touch’d a verdant hill; / Crowning its lawny crest with amber flame” (“Imitation of Spenser” Lines 1-3). So read John Keats’ first written lines of poetry, a sunrise behind a hill. Such descriptions permeate Keats’ poetry, demonstrating his interest in the natural landscape, but he was not unique in this regard. During much of the Romantic era, the Napoleonic Wars rendered continental Europe inaccessible, halting the rite-of-passage Grand Tours. The British leisure class then turned toward a burgeoning vacationing fad, Picturesque tours of the British countryside. Picturesque touring grew immensely popular, elevating its archetypical landscape to metonymizing England itself. Anna Arabindan-Kesson relates that in scholarship “the relationship between the genre of landscape painting, particularly the [P]icturesque, and the formation of [an English] national identity is well established” (473). Though Keats was abundantly aware of the Picturesque, he was not so entranced. My writing here converses with the limited scholarship on Keats’ poetical landscapes and specifically expands upon Ernest J. Lovell Jr.’s conjecture that Keats’ dislike of the Picturesque at the end of his career may have disposed him “to view sympathetically the agricultural scenes which gave rise to [‘To Autumn’]” (220). I do so by arguing that Keats’ manifests his disdain for the Picturesque at the end of his career in the Autumn Ode by reimagining the English landscape as that which is familiar.

Introduced by Reverend William Gilpin in the eighteenth century, the Picturesque is an aesthetic category of pleasurable artistic representations of landscapes demarcated by variety. Gilpin proposes the Picturesque as an intermediary to Edmund Burke’s opposing aesthetic categories, the Sublime and the Beautiful, and defines it as “that [particular] kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture” (*An Essay Upon Prints* x). This early definition intimates, as Ann Bermingham accordingly finds throughout Gilpin’s writings, that “the purpose of the Picturesque [is]...to ‘please,’ ‘delight,’ and ‘amuse,’” or succinctly, provide visual pleasure (84). Additionally, Gilpin’s definition emphasizes the Picturesque’s inseparability from its artistic depiction; Orvar Löfgren summarizes that “The task of the [Picturesque] tourist was to track down these paintable landscapes and...represent them in sketches, watercolors, and words” (24). In his foremost contribution, *Three Essays*, Gilpin essentializes the Picturesque composition as that which “[unites] in one whole a variety of parts” (19).

Here, variety means variety of shapes, subjects, colors, textures (but never smoothness) being subsumed in one composition. As a result, the viewer's eye wanders about the landscape rather than focusing on a singular subject.

With the Picturesque's purpose being the conveyance of visual pleasure, Picturesque tourists sought out and depicted landscapes that would maximize such pleasure. Three key components encapsulate this endeavor: adherence to Picturesque standards, framing, and imaginative alterations. Most often directed by Gilpin's guidebooks and written standards, pertinently, Picturesque tourists spurned winter landscapes and tillage. In *Remarks on Forest Scenery*, Gilpin observes: "although many appearances in winter are beautiful and amusing...the judicious painter will rarely introduce them in landscape, because he has choice of more beautiful effects" (*Remarks* 341; vol. 2). Throughout *Remarks*, Gilpin describes winter with either an overt tone of disparagement or one of ambivalence and sparsely mentions that an evergreen tree in winter may look pleasing. Additionally, Gilpin excludes from the Picturesque "the appendages of tillage" as scars of human activity, defacing the previously undisturbed landscape (*Three Essays* iii).

Upon determining the best vantage, the Picturesque tourist then exerts segregating control over the landscape by framing only its most pleasurable portion. Returning to Gilpin's definition, the Picturesque is inseparable from the practice of framing inherent to visual arts, which is the separation of wheat from chaff regarding subject matter. James Plumtre, an exemplary Picturesque tourist, offers a detailed view of a tourist's various "knick-knacks," among which he includes "a Claude-glass" (Löfgren 22). This Claude-glass, a small, tinted, convex mirror, was frequently used by tourists to pre-frame the landscape for easier representation. By doing so, the glass's user exerts control by separating the pleasurable from the unpleasurable. In this way, the Claude-glass facilitates the Picturesque tourist's delineation of what is and is not pleasurable.

Furthering the Claude-glass's implications and then discussing how Gilpin directs the Picturesque tourist to render the landscape, the Picturesque tourist subjected the landscape to hyper-reality in its representation. The Claude-glass's tinted mirror was designed to "impose some kind of order on the unknown and untamed landscapes," simplifying the value range to ease depiction (Löfgren 24). Gilpin strongly advocated for the Claude-glass, writing that by looking into the mirror "the eye examines the general effect, the forms of the objects, and the beauty of the tints, in one complex view. As the colours, too, are the very colours of Nature...they are the more brilliant, as they are the more condensed" (*Remarks* 233; vol. 1). Further, a tenet of the Picturesque tourist was Gilpin's statement that "the painter, who adheres to the composition of nature, will rarely make a good picture" (qtd. in Andrews 5). As such, Gilpin holds himself "at perfect liberty, in the first place, to...take up a tree here, and plant it there[,]...pare a knoll, or make an addition[,]...remove a piece of paling—a cottage—a wall—or any removeable object, which I dislike" (*Three Essays* 68). The

resulting artwork is not a reproduction of reality but a hyper-reality, a landscape fitted up, improved, corrected to maximize visual pleasure.

By the time Keats was writing, the Picturesque's heyday was over, yet it palpably influences his early poetry. Jane Darcy investigates Keats' relationship with the Picturesque in his letters and its influence in "On the Sea" and *Endymion*, but her emphases overlook Keats' most aesthetically Picturesque poem, "I stood tip toe upon a little hill," which even takes the form of a Picturesque experience. The poem opens with a description of a Picturesque landscape followed by the speaker's pleasure response. Keats writes that "There was a wide wand'ring for the greediest eye, / To peer about upon variety" (Lines 15-16). These lines mirror the way Picturesque "variety" rouses an onlooker's "wand'ring" eye. Variety specifically manifests in his diction: "slanting," "bending," and "jaunty" (Lines 4, 19, 22). Keats ends this first stanza with a description of the artistically generative pleasure that the Picturesque is expected to produce: "...many pleasures to my vision started; / So I straightway began to pluck a posey" (Lines 25-27). The similarities between "I stood tip-toe" and the Picturesque experience demonstrate Keats' familiarity and establish a baseline for considering "To Autumn."

Following his trip to the Isle of Wight, a popular Picturesque destination, in 1817, any prior favor Keats may have had for the Picturesque begins to wane. In a letter to his good friend John Taylor in June 1818, Keats lightheartedly chafes against English Picturesque painter Peter De Wint: "I shall become a disputant on the landscape" (*Letters* 93). Yet, by July 1819, during a second stay at Wight, Keats feels that he is "an old Stager in the picturesque" and, after decamping to Winchester, expresses "a great dislike of the picturesque" to Fanny Brawne (255, 259). In this disdainful mindset, Keats writes "To Autumn" with the Picturesque and attitudes of English nationalism in art on his mind. Lovell corroborates that "[Keats] was at the time in full reaction against...the Picturesque" and describes Keats as likely having a "settled dislike" (219-220). However, Lovell overlooks Keats' comment in a letter dated September 21, 1819, on the stubble-fields that inspire the ode: "I always somehow associate Chatterton with autumn. He is the purest writer in the English Language. He has no French idiom...English ought to be kept up" (*Letters* 271-272). Nearly seven decades later, Nicholas Roe uses this quotation to identify a preoccupation with English identity in English art running through "To Autumn" and argues that the dominance of old English words in the ode "effect[s] a restoration of the English language" to poetry (251). Though a consideration of Keats' relationship to the landscape lies beyond Roe's scope, the revisionary work Roe identifies in "To Autumn" is also present in Keats' treatment of the autumn landscape. Keats' juxtaposition of the ode's stubble-fields and his preoccupation with English identity in art implies that the concept of Englishness is on Keats' mind as he writes "To Autumn."

If Keats were to poetically envision the national landscape, it would be a Picturesque one, yet the Autumn Ode's landscape is decidedly not. The ode's

apostrophic form gives us the first clue of its divergence from the Picturesque. The speaker explicitly addresses the personified autumn: “Where are the songs of spring? / ...Think not of them, thou hast thy music too” (“To Autumn” Lines 22-23). Keats reinforces the ode’s focus on autumn by avoiding first-person pronouns, displacing centripetal focus on the speaker. The selflessness of the ode’s form and the centrality of its celebration of autumn demonstrate Keats’ ambivalence to what the landscape may offer him, which enables the landscape to stand for itself.

Disinterested in maximizing visual pleasure, Keats writes “To Autumn” contrary to the Picturesque’s standards. A misreading of “To Autumn” would look towards the landscape’s variety, the winding “hilly bourn” and plethora of subjects, to conclude that Keats poeticizes a Picturesque landscape (Line 30). This misreading demonstrates the insufficiency of analyzing for variety because it fails to consider how the ode abnegates other Picturesque standards. First, “half-reap’d furrow[s]” of tillage dominate the landscape, which Picturesque taste deemed unsightly (Line 16). If Keats had desired to compose a Picturesque poem inspired by the stubble-fields, then Keats would have taken the imaginative liberties of a Picturesque tourist to replace them with pasturage, yet he does not. Second, Keats amalgamates the autumn landscape with the winter landscape in the third stanza. The motif of death in the setting sun’s “soft-dying” light, the barren “stubble-fields,” the “wailful choir” of “mourn[ing]” gnats, a “full grown lamb” ready for slaughter—all connote that autumn is dying to give way to winter (Lines 25-27, 30). The final line, “swallows” gathering in the sky, readying to migrate south for winter, reinforces the premonition of winter (Line 33). The implications of winter in this final stanza connote that the autumn landscape cannot exist without occasioning the winter landscape.

Keats further pushes against the Picturesque’s segregation of the landscape by not attempting to frame it. Formally, Keats widens the ode’s frame by adding a line to his typical ten-line ode form. Additionally, he divides the ode into three stanzas, which afford three prospects that progressively widen the visual frame. In the first, the speaker inspects a cottage garden evidenced by vines on “thatch-eves,” “cottage-trees,” and garden flora: “flowers,” “gourd,” and “hazel” (Lines 4-9). In the second, our vantage moves to the fields denoted by the “half-reaped furrow” (Line 16). Lastly, we are pulled backwards such that the furrow becomes a small detail of the much larger “stubble plains” (Line 26). At this distance, the once-detailed garden of the first stanza is also lexically reduced to a “garden-croft” (Line 32). Pulling backwards with such consistent velocity whereby one detailed vantage becomes subsumed by another more distant but equally detailed vantage, Keats widens the landscape’s frame, revealing unsightly elements to the Picturesque taste. Moreover, the poem opens with the “maturing sun” rising and ends with the setting sun casting its “rosy hue” on the field (Lines 2, 26). In effect, as the diegetic day has progressed, the speaker has turned one-hundred-eighty degrees from watching sunrise to sunset. As we read the poem, the speaker does not

gaze at a fixed angle but operates as a panopticon. No amount of convexity to a Claude-glass can reproduce the ode's panoramic, frameless view.

Lastly, Keats rejects the imaginative liberties that the Picturesque sanctions by allowing his negatively capable mind to detail the landscape sparsely. Keats defines Negative Capability as remaining "in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (*Letters* 41-42). In "To Autumn," Keats remains comfortable in his inability to depict the landscape perfectly. Rather than chasing after prolix descriptions, as he does in the overtly Picturesque "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill," in which he provides forty-five lines describing the speaker's experience at a stream, Keats leaves sparse hints of the autumn landscape (Lines 61-106). He moves from "vines that round the thatch eves" to "moss'd cottage trees" to "the gourd" and "hazel shells" to "a granary floor" to "a half-reap'd furrow" and so on (Lines 4, 5, 7, 14, 16). Lexically, Keats' anxiety to detail the landscape in "I stood tip toe" is gone. The result of Keats' ambivalence to detail in "To Autumn" is that the reader's passive imagination fleshes out one image and connects it spatially to the next. In essence, the autumn landscape unfolds itself. With the sole exception of the personified figure of autumn, Keats leaves the landscape to reveal itself in the reader's mind.

In "To Autumn," Keats puts forward the familiar, subdued, *actual* English landscape in favor of the Picturesque. Scholars like Lovell point out that "To Autumn" celebrates "the beauty of common things" but they miss its critical implication (208). Though the Picturesque landscape may have represented England, England was rarely Picturesque. From his home in Hamstead, Keats travelled over a hundred miles to reach the Isle of Wight and hundreds more to go on his Scottish tour. The stubble-field Keats chances upon in Winchester would have been an abundantly familiar sight to all, yet it is this scene that Keats chooses to metonymize the English landscape. The scene is unspectacular, but Keats sees its familiarity as more English than the Picturesque ever could be.

In summation, I posited that in "To Autumn," Keats contends against the contemporary notion that the Picturesque represents the homogenous English landscape. I outlined the important elements of the Picturesque category and the Picturesque tourist's endeavor to develop a comprehensive understanding of the Picturesque. After contextualizing the ode, using this framework, I approached "To Autumn" to determine that Keats rejects the Picturesque's aim to maximize visual pleasure by explicitly contradicting Picturesque standards, providing a frameless view, and leaving the landscape unadorned. As a result, Keats recalibrates the English landscape to that which is abundantly familiar. The setting sun of the ode's final stanza anticipates the Picturesque sunset as Victorian sensibilities soon took over as well as a more imminent sunset: within a year and a half Keats would be dead. As fittingly as a sunrise marks the beginning of Keats' career, a sunset marks the beginning of its end.

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