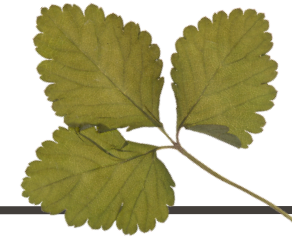


KEATSIAN ROMANTICISM IN THE AESTHETICS OF EXCESS

I. INTRODUCTION



While walking to the summit of **St Giles Hill in Winchester**, the panoramic view of a half-reaped cornfield inspired Keats to create his **last ode** *To Autumn*. This year of 1819 marked the peak of Keats's poetic career, but ironically this harvest season also happened to be the time when he developed deadly symptoms of tuberculosis. *To Autumn* symbolises not only the death motif shown in Keats's earlier works, but also transcends the emotions he experiences throughout each phase of life, from the apprehension of premature death found in *When I have fears that I may cease to be* to the Lethan sorrow that is expressed in *Ode to Melancholy*. This autumnal ode sublimates Keats's reflection on a final gleaning of his youthful life into a finest 'swan song'. Keats is remembered by the *fin-de-siècle* poet Francis Thompson as **'wrapt in his radiant rhyme,/ Sunlike in sea./ Life longer had been life too long'** (Thompson 2001, 183). The cultural imaginary of Decadence at the fin de siècle continues to be suffused with the afterglow of Keats's **sensual and poetic excesses**.

II. METHODOLOGY

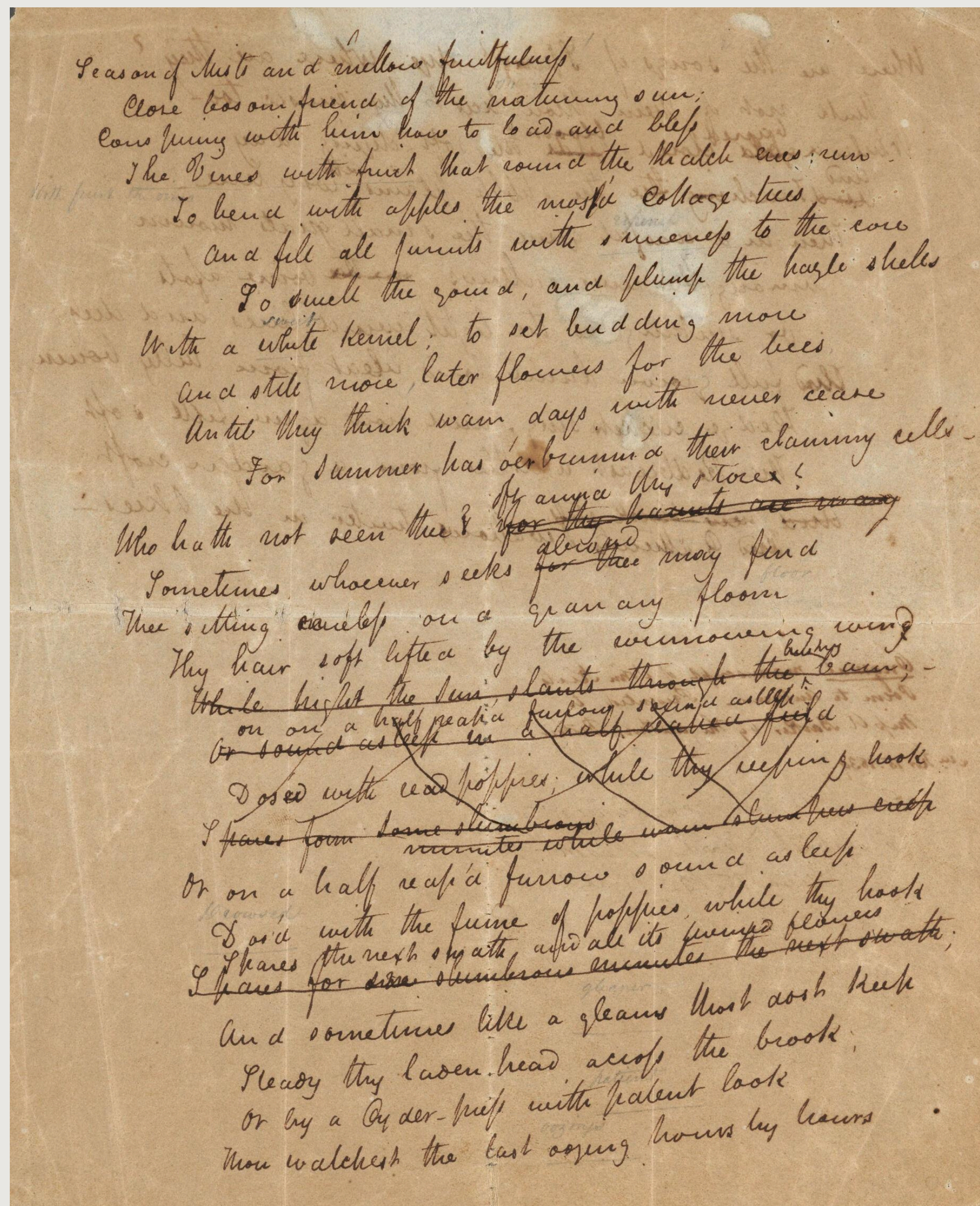


- Through a close reading of Keats's *To Autumn*, this poster seeks to examine how Keats's poetic axiom promotes a **'fine excess'** (Keats [1818], 380) that harmonises emotional impulses with control, in contrast to the prevalent impression of **'overflow of feeling'** (Wordsworth 1851, 662) and **self-indulgence of Romanticism and the Victorian Decadence**.
- This poster proposes that the sublimity of excess in the ode is not merely a metaphorical discourse but an ontological reflection, as what Paul Ricoeur describes as a **'tensive aliveness'** where 'utter existence appears as blossoming forth' (Ricoeur 2003, 296 & 365).
- Building on the correlation between poetic expression and living existence, this poster will apply Wilhelm Dilthey's approach of **poetics and experience** to explore how Keats's poetry embodies the essence of poetic creativities and life experience that vitalises **the aesthetics of tragic sublime** in the Age of Decadent movement.

KEATS'S AXIOMS OF POETRY

Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason. (Keats [1817], 370)

Poetry should surprise by fine excess and Singularity; that its Beauty should be natural, complete, calm, and yet leave the reader in the luxury of twilight. (Keats [1818], 380)



JOHN KEATS. 1819. "TO AUTUMN." AUTOGRAPH MANUSCRIPT, HOUGHTON LIBRARY, HARVARD UNIVERSITY



ELAINE DUIGENAN, 2021. NEW ART INSTALLATION KEATS HOUSE, HAMPSTEAD, LONDON

To Autumn

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 oozing 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-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

IV. ANALYSIS



THE SUBLIME OF NATURE:

Unlike the conventional literary theme depicting autumn as a perishing season, Keats opens the ode with a **synaesthetic abundance of sensory experience**:

'Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness' (To Autumn, line 1).

The sublimity of nature emerges not solely through its **idyllic essence** but also in its **ephemeral nature**, **'Fruit with ripeness to the core'** (line 6).

The panoramic pastoral opening dissolves into a surrealistic imagination of the metabolism of nature, **the transient abundance is envisioned to decay: 'To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells' (line 7).**

POETICS AND EXPERIENCE:

The emptiness of 'gourd' and 'shells' can also be compared to the hollowness of a corporeal body. Anatomical imageries are often seen in Keats's poetry which can be traced back to his medical background as a trained surgeon, Dilthey (1985, 60) states that a poet's lived experience is communicable with others in poetic expressions as **'[p]oetry continually leads us back to this intensity of the feeling of life'**. In a prior sonnet composed in the same year, Keats expresses that death intensifies the magnitude of life as **'Death is Life's high meed' (Keats [1819]).**

The etymology of **'Conspiring'** (line 3) is **'to breathe together'**, which physiologically connotes with a tuberculosis-inflected sense of breathlessness. For Ricoeur (2003, 73), the poet's trope is a **'breathe force and energy'** that vitalises impulses to the discourse. In this sense, poetic works not only possess the metaphorical power to convey emotion, but the act of breathing also creates musicality as the poem is recited.

Poetic works are continuously and organically enlivened. According to Dilthey (1985, 53), 'the creative life that produced literary works still visibly pulsates in the **final form (Gestalt)**'. The manuscripts were highly revised comparing to other odes. For example, the line **'Or sound sleep on a half reaped field'** (*To Autumn* Autograph manuscript) was altered into **'Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep'** (line 16), the trochee foot of 'sound sleep' in the original line was shifted to the end to maintain the iambic pentameter to sound more somnolent. The diphthong of the revised 'furrow' not only creates a sustained sorrowful effect but also creates an internal rhyme with the 'winnow' in the previous line.

KEATSIAN EXCESS AND THE DECADENCE:

The symbolism of **over-ripened abundance and mortality** in the ode reflects Keats's notion of **Negative capability** where beauty flourishes in uncertainties. This notion also resonates with Dilthey's (1985, 59) philosophy on poetics that 'a poet possesses and enjoys his own existence through a strong sense of life which oscillates **between pleasure and suffering**'. This tension of a **tragic sublime** has anticipated the **material excess** in the Decadent Movement. Oscar Wilde regards Keats as **'Priest of Beauty'** (Stokes 1996, 104). Arthur Symons considers Keats as 'more than a Decadent' (Boyiopoulos 2015, 60), Keatsian aesthetics can also be seen in the parallelism between Ernest Dowson's poem *Autumnal* and Keats's ode: **'The twilight of the year is sweet:/ Where shadow and the darkness meet'** (Dowson 2003, 99).

V. CONCLUSION



Unbridled tragic emotions are an intensifier for the essence of life, as beauty and decay are central motifs associated with the *fin de siècle*. Keats's *To Autumn* embodies **'a prelapsarian dream' before an inevitable 'terminus of nature'** (Vendler 1983, 247). Notably, there is no first person 'I' in the entire ode but the poet's self is inebriated in the quintessence of emotion and the morbid sensuousness. Keats's poetic identity of 'chameleon poet as [who] is continually in for - and filling some other Body' ([1818] 1990, 419) highlights the aesthetics of beauty and poetics existing **beyond the 'over-brimmed' excess and the natural cycle of decay**.

Thus, Keatsian Romanticism continues to shed light on **the aesthetics of excess** in modern culture.

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