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‘Ripeness to the Core’: A Gerontological Reading of Keats’s ‘Ode to Autumn’

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Abstract

In ‘Ode to Autumn’ Keats’s imagination is imbued with the ideas of organic growth and ageing. The images used in the first part of the poem reflect those ideas. A thorough gerontological study indicates that the process of development includes both reproduction and the post-reproductive phase of senescence. The last stanza of the poem with its melancholy overtones anticipates the winter of old age, decay and death.

Keywords: ageing, death, regeneration, senescence, nature.

Introduction

Keats’s ‘Ode to Autumn’ displays a closely knit structure of images, some of which warrant a separate study. It is often said that ‘To Autumn’ is the most objective of all the great odes of Keats. It is also said that the poem deals, not directly with thoughts or emotions, but with the objects of those thoughts or emotions. It gives a peculiarly concrete nature to the poem, a nature that reflects an imagination occupied with the varied disciplines of knowledge available to man in this world.

Discussion: The first stanza presents autumn as the season of plenty or profusion. This concept of plenty is metaphorically connected with the concept of fertility and (re)production. The images of pregnancy abound in the first stanza. These images are logically preceded by an image of marked sexual connotation: ‘[...] fill all fruit with ripeness to the core’ (Keats 219). The expressions like ‘swell’ and ‘plump’ (Keats 219) contain images of pregnant nature. From a scientific point of view this is quite accurate since fruits lead to seeds which, in turn, lead to regeneration of life. The ‘sweet kernel’ is the very matrix of life (Keats 219). The whole stanza and, even, the whole poem give us the idea of a process-the process of ‘ripeness’-which, ultimately, brings a gerontological reading into the poem.

There are different perspectives available on the process of ageing. What is common to these perspectives is an almost morbid preoccupation with the idea of finality and decay (Victor 2). Interestingly, the one thing that the poem is silent about, except some faint and distant echoes of winter and desolation, is finality or death. It seems that theoretical gerontology is strangely obsessed with death as final cause which is the purpose of ageing. Of course, biological change serves as the efficient cause of ageing and in this very change remains the seed of rebirth. Death, thus, forms a subtext to the poem along with the idea of regeneration which is rendered in the text most accurately, that is, biologically. The images of pregnancy are built into this pattern of ideas. By now, I think, it is clear that the seasonal process of autumn and winter, looking forward to spring, is the metaphorical process of ageing with ripeness, death and regeneration.

Harold Bloom is, I think, in the wrong in considering spring in ‘To Autumn’ as a projection of Apocalypse (423). Apocalypse transcends the normal framework of time. It is located, according to biblical symbolism, beyond time. On the contrary, spring/rebirth in the poem is a part of the very process of organic development, realized in actual time. Rebirth is the natural outcome of the process of ripening. The logic is validated not by the spiritual paradigm but by the strictly empirical/biological one. Neither does the idea of spring/rebirth mark any ‘final finality’ since it starts a fresh cycle of ageing. Death/winter may terminate an individual life but cannot do so to the life of a species. Of course, nothing here is outside the ordinary pattern of time. Time is of crucial importance to a gerontologist since it mediates the experience of ageing and the changes accompanying it. This experience is, however, not homogeneous and varies from observer to observer according to various factors (Victor 5).

What makes the poem attractive from a gerontological point of view is the paradox that the same change that leads to death also leads to rebirth. It is, however, debatable whether reproduction can be considered a part of the process of ageing. One gerontologist equates ageing with the deteriorating process of senescence. He also points out that senescence starts after the phase

of reproduction is over (Victor 2). According to this view reproductive phase marks a sort of climax up to which point all physiological changes tend to be constructive and positive. After that climactic phase everything deteriorates. The poem is explicitly concerned with the concept of ripeness which is clearly a pre-reproductive/mid-reproductive process. But it is, perhaps, valid to argue that the concept of senescence is implicit in the subtext of the poem. The argument rests on a curious theory called 'wear and tear' which locates the cause of ageing in 'overuse', a function of the reproductive phase (Victor 3). The process of reproduction uses up all of the vitality. What remains is a façade of never-ending 'summer'. The poet says '[...] to set budding more, /And still more, later flowers for the bees, /Until they think warm days will never cease', when what is really ahead is the cold days of winter (Keats 219). The paradox is, thus, reversed in the sense that what causes rebirth also causes death. However, the winter of senescence comes into the poem from a completely different source-the world of human activity.

Environmental factors play a very important role in the process of ageing. It is through these factors that the internal physiological changes are mediated. Environmental factors in the poem include both the season of autumn and the agricultural activities of men. The acts of reaping and gleaning together shape the landscape of winter. The desolation of the 'stubble-plains' is not the effect of the season but of human activity (Keats 220). The winter entails a disengagement from action that facilitates the coming of senescence (Victor 18).¹The phase of old age is marked, as much by bodily decay as by an inadequate social response. The small gnats mourning 'in a wailful choir' also add to the effects of the environment (Keats 220). However, everything is presented as normal, natural. Nothing interrupts the process of aging; no stroke of fate mercilessly brings about an untimely death. There is a significant difference between ageing and disease, the second being acute and not progressive (Victor 3). In 'Ode to Autumn' there is only ageing and no disease. Thus, the poem exhibits a fine combination of static and dynamic elements. The second stanza represents a stasis or, rather, duration in time. By the time we reach the last stanza the autumn has already prepared to leave its place to winter.

Conclusion: It has already been said that the experience of ageing is not homogenous. It depends on the attitude of the person experiencing or observing it. This attitude, in turn, is determined by the socio-cultural background of the person concerned. As a romantic poet Keats's attitude to the process of ageing is motivated by his deepest faith in nature's scheme. It is as positive and unobtrusive as one can get. This lends the poem a quiet dignity. It is not that Keats is not aware of the desolation and the decay that the onset of winter must cause (in fact, he is also aware of the remoteness of spring), but he is much more interested in the here and the now: 'Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they? / Think not of them, thou has thy music too [...]' (220).

Notes:

1. According to Disengagement theory cessation of/ retirement from action reinforces the physical changes of ageing.

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