The Politics of Gleaning in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and "To Autumn"

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The Politics of Gleaning in Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” and “To Autumn”

In a recent discussion of the relationship between Keats’s poetry and politics, William Keach has argued that in order to appreciate the pressures of politics on poetic language we should “make ourselves newly alert to the ways in which acts of writing and reading may be subject to historical and political circumstances quite remote from a poem’s immediate field of reference.”¹ In this essay I shall argue that attention to the political and social position of gleaners in 1819, as mediated by an elegiac letter published in The Examiner mourning the loss of gleaners to the countryside and to literature, has important implications for our understanding of both “Ode to a Nightingale” and “To Autumn.”

On 1 November 1818, The Champion, a weekly newspaper which Keats regularly read, included a short report on “Provincial Occurrences” entitled “Gleaning”: it recorded that in two separate instances, at the Quarter Sessions of Huntingdonshire and of the East Riding of Yorkshire, three people had been indicted for “stealing a certain quantity of corn in the straw.”² In each case, the accused, convicted both of trespass and of theft, were sentenced to seven days confinement and in the East Riding case to an additional fine of one shilling. Compared to other reports in the newspaper (which often included insurrection, riot, plots of treason, murder, violence, etc.), the offence of gleaning was relatively minor: the publication of the report seems to suggest an additional, symbolic significance.

A week later, in The Examiner of 8 November a correspondent who signed himself “J. L.” wrote a fulsome diatribe on the economic and social implications of the 1815 Corn Law (“under its famine-breathing influence, a fine harvest leaves the populace of England half starved upon potatoes—a bad one sends them by thousands to the grave”),³ a protectionist law which kept grain prices artificially high by restricting the importation of foreign grain until prices had

2. The Champion No. 304 (1 November 1818), 691. The Champion was a liberal journal for which Keats’s friend J. H. Reynolds wrote the theatrical reviews, and for which Keats himself wrote three reviews in late 1817 and early 1818; he also published three poems in the journal (the sonnets on the Elgin Marbles and “To Haydon,” published 9 March 1817, and “On the Sea,” published 17 August 1817).
3. The Examiner No. 567 (8 November 1818), 717. The Examiner, edited by Leigh Hunt, published eight poems by Keats between May 1816 and September 1817, and it is known that Keats read the paper regularly and with care; see, for example, The Letters of John Keats, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), i, 393; ii, 24–25.
reached a certain level. On 22 November J. L. wrote again on the iniquity of the 1815 Law under the heading “The Corn Bill—Gleaning Made Robbery” (a letter dated “Nov. 10”), and commented on the recent trials for gleaning. The letter is worth quoting at length for the light it sheds on Keats’s poems:

It is an hard time: since my last I have read two trials for Gleaning! and both Judges, without ceremony, condemned it as trespass and robbery. Feeling nothing, they uttered not a word in favour of humanity—not a word on the antiquity of the custom—nor had they a moment’s hesitation at taking away from the poor a privilege of three thousand years standing! (Blackstone says, that the tenure of the Landlords is but by privilege.)

However, allow me, Mr. Editor, to send a sigh after the nicest word in the language, which must now grow obsolete; the very language of our books is unsuitable to the harshness of the time. The word Glean has ever been a favourite word with poets and authors; it presented instantly to one’s mind summer and sunshine and charity, love, virtue, happiness, the brightest flower in civilized society; it pictured man satisfied with having secured himself from want, looking on pleased that his less fortunate fellow-creatures, who, like the fowls of the air, gather not into barns, should have a taste of the bounty of Heaven at this holiday time of the year; but the reality is gone.

The prettiest story we have extant of the early people of the earth arose out of the more ancient privilege of Gleaning. I can scarcely remember now without tears Boaz and Ruth, the filial piety of the lovely girl, and all the pastoral innocence and beautiful simplicity of this interesting tale. The charm is gone. Ruth, Lavinia, and Rosina, were robbers.4

The passionate denunciation of this new injustice against an already overburdened section of the community is interesting for the fact that it is couched in terms not only of justice but also of poetry: in denuding the peasants of this right—one which was very real and important at a time when rural unemploy—

4. The Examiner No. 560 (22 November 1818), 745. Lavinia is from James Thomson's rewriting of the Book of Ruth in The Seasons, “Autumn,” iii, 177–310; Rosina is the eponymous heroine of a comic opera by Frances Brooke (Rosina, A Comic Opera, 1782) which was well-known in the early nineteenth century, and which, according to Brooke, also rewrote Ruth (see Allardyce Nicoll, A History of English Drama, 1660–1900 [1927; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952], iii, 206, 240). In fact, J. L. seems to have forgotten—or not to have known—that there was a similar outcry thirty years earlier when the Court of Common Pleas decided against the legality of gleaning in 1788: see J. L. Hammond and B. Hammond, The Village Labourer (1911; London: Longman, 1966), pp. 103–5; and David H. Morgan, “The Place of Harvesters in Nineteenth-Century Village Life” in Village Life and Labour, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 56, points out that attempts to restrict gleaning continued throughout the nineteenth century.
ment and inadequate poor laws meant that gleaning could represent the difference between satiation and hunger and between hunger and starvation—the judges are also denuding the English language and English culture. Indeed, as J. L. argues, the figure of the gleaner is an archetype of literature, present in the pastoral tradition as a nostalgic signifier of aristocratic beneficence, a key figure in the balancing of benign patronage with the rapacious exploitation of rural workers.

From J. L.’s letter, it is clear that the very concept of the gleaner underwent a sea-change—from the archetypal beneficiary of charity to a criminal—in the summer and autumn of 1818, and that this structural change in the semiotics of gleaning explains, in some degree, Keats’s employment of the gleaner-figure in “Ode to a Nightingale” and “To Autumn.” A notorious difficulty in the interpretation of the “Ode to a Nightingale” is Keats’s assertion that Ruth is sad, homesick, and in tears:

Perhaps the selfsame song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn. (lines 65–67)

The problem is that none of this (except perhaps the assertion that Ruth is amongst “alien” corn) occurs in the Book of Ruth. Recently, critics have attempted to solve the puzzle of Keats’s redescription: Victor Lams argues that the changes are functional and that the poem is a Keatsian response to Milton’s Paradise Lost, “Keats’s lament that the Paradise which Milton had described so movingly is unavailable”; Barry Gradman considers the alteration to be less intentional and claims that Keats “mingles a remembrance of Cordelia with the conscious Biblical reference,” so rewriting the story as a response to King Lear. But it is necessary to look at the rhetoric surrounding events of Keats’s day in order to understand Ruth’s predicament, and to understand the related image of the gleaner in “To Autumn.” Keats’s Ruth, in “Ode to a Nightingale,” is weeping, alienated, and homesick in part because she represents the fate of the gleaner.

5. See John Burnett, Plenty and Want: A Social History of Diet in England from 1815 to the Present Day (London: Nelson, 1966), Chap. 2, on the diet of agricultural workers at the time; and Hammond and Hammond The Village Labourer, p. 103 on the importance of gleaning for supplementary diet.
6. See, for example, James Thomson, The Seasons, “Summer,” ii.165–176; for a contemporary appeal against the persecution of gleaners, see John Clare’s “The Harvest Morning,” stanza 5 (written in 1818).
in 1818–1819: significantly, in Keats’s poem she is not gleaning, but standing and weeping. She represents the imaginative rewriting of the Book of Ruth suitable for the modern age. No longer is she aided and protected by a landlord who goes so far as to order his worker to “let fall also some of the handfuls of purpose for her, and leave them that she may glean them and rebuke her not” (Ruth II. 16).9 instead, in the early-nineteenth century she would be abandoned by her protector—or worse, prosecuted by him—and instead of feeling secure in her adopted land would feel “sick for home.” The parallel structure of self-induced nostalgia in the letter and in the poem—the letter’s “but the reality is gone. . . . The charm is gone” and the Ode’s repetitions “forlorn” and “adieu” and its final “Fled is that music”—is strikingly precise: both mourn the loss of an earlier state, and together with the references to hunger in Keats’s poem (the youth who “grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies” and the “hungry generations”)10 and Ruth’s sadness, they suggest that at least part of the emotive impulse of the gleaner figure in the poem is the recognition of the criminalization of the gleaner.

But Ruth is not the only gleaner in Keats’s poetry of 1819, and his rewriting of the tale is not the only method of political comment which Keats discovered: the second stanza of “To Autumn” also contains a memorable image of a gleaner.11 Recently, there has been a certain amount of interest in the question of the relationship between the poetry of Keats and the political events of the early nineteenth century: “To Autumn” has emerged as something of a key text in this debate due to the clear discrepancy between its apparent denial of historical and political analysis, and the events of the summer and early autumn of 1819, most notably the outrage of the Peterloo massacre. Jerome McGann has analysed the poem and the events surrounding its composition as “an attempt to ‘escape’ the period which provides the poem with its context.” Countering this, Paul H. Fry has argued that “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.” Arguing against both McGann’s analysis of political evasion and Fry’s discussion of an existential rather than social concern, William Keach has tried to show that the contemporary political rhetoric which produces the image of the bees in the

first stanza suggests that the poem “fends off but cannot finally exclude a negative historical actuality which Keats was certainly in touch with.”

There is no question that Keats’s poetry is often overtly political: the rhetoric of politics in his poetry includes the invective of *Endymion* III. 1–21 and “Isabella,” lines 113–144, the political allegory of “Hyperion,” the satire of “The Jealousies,” the parody of a poem like “To Mrs. Reynolds’s Cat,” the nostalgic ballad form of “Robin Hood,” and the political paean of “Written on the Day That Mr. Leigh Hunt Left Prison.” But in “To Autumn” a different rhetoric is employed: the rhetoric of linguistic reappropriation. If, as J. L. claimed, the English language had been denuded of the word “gleaner” in the autumn of 1818, by reinscribing the word into poetry and into the poetic tradition, Keats was making (consciously or not) a claim for the legitimacy of the act of gleaning: he discovered another way of writing politics into poetry, one that, through its silence, exerted a political pressure of presupposition. Because the word “gleaner” was a part of the tradition of artistic expression and because the outlawing of gleaners implied the outlawing of the poetic expression of gleaning, by employing the word and the image in “To Autumn” Keats reappropriates the illegal act of gleaning for poetry and for gleaners:

And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep  
Steady thy laden head across a brook. (19–20)

When we acknowledge the socio-political implications of gleaning in the summer of 1819, then we begin to understand that the syntactical steadiness of this stanza, the highly achieved and “disinterested” decorum of the language, involves not only a pastoral nostalgia for a time when gleaning was legal, but a defiant re-writing of the text of history through the discourse of poetry in order to reassert the legitimacy of this particular type of “robbery.” It is precisely by silencing the political question of gleaning, by assuming the word and thereby presupposing the legitimacy of the concept, that such poetic reappropriation occurs.

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