

Forum

Forum Policy: Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of scholarly and critical interest generally. Decision to publish will be made at the Editor's discretion, and authors of articles commented on will be invited to reply. Letters should be fewer than one thousand words of text and should be double-spaced; footnotes are discouraged.

Keats's "To Autumn"

To the Editor:

Accuracies of a natural kind cannot avail the jargonizing critic through whose mind a garden becomes a "natural-social symbiosis" (p. 206), not even when the essay (Virgil Nemoianu, "The Dialectics of Movement in Keats's 'To Autumn,'" *PMLA*, 93 [1978], 205–14) entirely presumes on acquaintance with nature. With respect, therefore, to the natural science in that article, and in "To Autumn," these qualifications can be suggested:

1. For the sentimental expression that Keats's first stanza contains "many touches of Indian summer" (p. 206), there is no climatological basis: prolonged summer warmth into an *American* calendar autumn is characteristically hazy and dry, qualities differing radically from Keats's ruling and peculiarly English tenor, "Season of mists." As contradistinguished from convected haze, mist forms ground level in comparatively cool air, a condition of atmosphere signified by the cirri in stanza 3 ("barred clouds") and in relation to which the *English* "warm days" of stanza 1 must be gauged.

2. Keats's "hook" (stanza 2), properly speaking, is neither a knife nor a symbol of "war between man and nature" (p. 211). It is in fact the so-called English hook, which in Keats's poem implies that scenic repose of an implement laid by, as often depicted in the English landscape art, for instance, of Turner and Gainsborough.

3. The "small gnats" (stanza 3) are more significant than Nemoianu suggests by "insects" (p. 206), for these are midges, as may be told (a) by their swarming near shallows, that is, near the stiller watercourses where shallows are commonly found, (b) by that previously mentioned atmospheric clarity which quickens their larvae, and (c) by the categorical designation "small."

4. Nemoianu's summary of stanza 3, "the birds are leaving" (p. 206), is misleading. The redbreast, rather, sings later into declining daylight than all the other birds, and her whistling from the garden croft not only tells the time of evening but also marks that

characteristic deep quiet before dark. The swallows, too, so far from "leaving," are playfully converging, for besides the onomatopoeic convention of "twitter" is Keats's higher natural truth that swallows do so only and not unless they are "gathering," that is, approaching one another on close lines of flight, only to veer before touching.

5. Among other material impositions by the essayist are (a) that the beehives are "dispersed among the trees," (b) that the hazels "form a hedge," (c) that the vine fruit is "grapes," and (d) that there are present "lush grass," "immediacy of buzzing insects," and the "heavy scent of flowers" (p. 206)—none of which is warrantably imaged in the poem.

6. Further interpretive impositions are suggested by the expressions "dry depletion," "wiry sounds of emptiness," "acid test of validity," "polyvalence," "alienation," "apathetic immediate present," "nature's . . . aimless movement," "atomization," "mechanical regularity," "monotonous units," "disengagement," and "anguish" (pp. 211, 212), for, even out of context, these terms betray an insensate theoretical mind merely palling over "To Autumn."

Finally, in saying that we must never forget "that a release of critical imagination is greatly helped by a grasp of the firm objective reality of the poem" (p. 212), Nemoianu is claiming preeminence for critical "release" based on a "grasp" apparently infirm. That social-chemical cant about nature as "process" (e.g., p. 210) derives from a predetermined argument ignorant of Keats's nature, and for that reason Nemoianu, by his own implication, is the more critically contriving in his wholesale application of plane geometry and "dialectics."

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Mr. Nemoianu replies:

I was inclined at first to take David Blythe's letter as an exercise in learned wit, a jocular attempt to laud my essay by setting up a querulous persona whose absurd objections would, ironically, confirm