

“The Very Music of the Name”: Uncertainty as Aesthetic Principle in Keats’s *Endymion*

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IT is generally agreed that, if John Keats had wanted to stave off early criticism of *Endymion* (1818), then the 1818 preface published with the poem likely did more harm than good. Keats’s opening gambit is to say that he regrets even having arranged to have the poem published, and he states that at least half the poem is not good enough to merit printing at all. He also paints himself as inexperienced and immature, opening the door for criticisms of the “lisp[ing] sedition” variety.¹ By way of apology, perhaps, Keats then extends those remarks on his own immaturity into a reflection on adolescence in general, and on the transition from youthful innocence to grown experience:

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¹ See [John Gibson Lockhart], “The Cockney School of Poetry,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 3 (1818), 524. Research for this essay began during my time as Fleeman Fellow at the University of St. Andrews in 2018. I would like to express gratitude in particular to Dr. Tom Jones, who oversees the fellowship, and to the wider School of English for accommodating this work.

The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted.²

In Keats's striking formulation, there is a certain "space of life" within which the "way of life" is uncertain—and "uncertainty" itself was a key term for Keats when composing *Endymion*. In the original, unpublished preface Keats similarly confesses that, in writing the poem, his "steps were all uncertain,"³ suggesting that his revision to an uncertain "way" of life might relate as much to route or road as method or manner. Only a few dozen lines into the poem will *Endymion*'s narrator ask the "wilderness" to "quickly dress / My uncertain path with green," and Endymion begins Book II, like Keats himself, "wandering in uncertain ways."⁴ What is this uncertain path, trodden by the narrator and then by Endymion himself? And how does it relate to Keats's own uncertainty, on setting out to write his first major poem and on embarking on his journey toward poetic greatness?

This essay is a study of uncertainty in *Endymion*, as a set of images in its narrative, but also as a ruling aesthetic principle that arose out of Keats's advancements in verse practice. I contend that Keats's much-celebrated—and, at the time, critically maligned—experiments in rhyme, rhythm, and meter conspire to create a poetic context in which certainty, and certain knowledge, is perpetually called into question, and where uncertainty becomes a standard condition of experience. This formally realized, rhythm-borne uncertainty has a threefold existence: in the interplay that Keats opens up between verse sentences and poetic lines; in the tendency of his more unusual rhymes to revise and re-form the shapes and sounds of words; and in the name "Endymion" itself, as it is subjected to the pressures of rhythm and rhyme. Such uncertainty, I claim, makes possible

² John Keats, "Preface" (1818) to *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*, in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 102–3.

³ John Keats, "The Original Preface to *Endymion*," in *The Poems of John Keats*, p. 739.

⁴ John Keats, *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*, in *The Poems of John Keats*, p. 104, Book I, ll. 59, 60–61; and p. 133, Book II, l. 48. Further references to *Endymion* are to this edition and appear in the text by page, Book, and line number.

the kinds of metamorphoses and transformations for which the poem is renowned. By arguing that the project of *Endymion*'s aesthetic is one of uncertainty, I aim to connect the poem to the wider intellectual milieu in which Keats worked, resisting the notion that the poem is pure escapism or fantasy; as the latter sections of this essay make clear, this reading has implications as to how we understand Keats's much-discussed relation to political thinking.

In this way, I show that part of the radical, even dangerous, thinking that *Endymion* involves itself in happens at the level of form. First, I sketch a notion of "uncertainty" as it exists as a dominant theme in Keats's thinking circa 1818, and as an essential aspect of the intellectual context in which he wrote. I next outline the various ways in which experiences of uncertainty arise in *Endymion* as a consequence of its form, tracing those experiences through Keats's interplay of verse sentences and poetic lines, the materially transformative nature of his experimental rhymes, and the "changeable" nature of the character of *Endymion*. By arguing that these formal elements are central to the generation of textual uncertainty in the poem, I aim to show the attachments of such aesthetic elements to Keats's philosophic, political, and ethical impulses; in so doing, I offer an apology for formalist readings of Keats's poetry, which have to some extent been sidelined in recent years by strongly historicist methodologies. By connecting once again form to politics in Keats's thinking, I aim also to show the inseparability of historicist and formalist methodologies when a comprehensive understanding of the poem itself is the goal.

My reading of *Endymion* is indebted to that of Porscha Fermanis's *John Keats and the Idea of Enlightenment* (2009). Fermanis reads *Endymion*'s journey, as other critics have, as a parallel to Keats's own poetic development—but she also highlights the ways in which the poem's narrative reflects the larger progress of Enlightenment, "from rudeness to refinement and from feudal to civil society."⁵ However, where Fermanis credits New Historicism for demonstrating "the

⁵ Porscha Fermanis, *John Keats and the Ideas of the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2009), p. 15.

inadequacy of exclusively generic, thematic and formal approaches to Keats's poetry" (*John Keats and the Idea of Enlightenment*, p. 9) (on the grounds that such approaches risk presenting Keats solely as sensuous aesthete or as literary escapist), I aim to show that the traditionally "intrinsic" branches of criticism are still useful for understanding the ideational content of Keats's poetry. In this vein, I follow recent scholarship that has taken as its focal point Keats's aesthetic dimension, the question of his experimental style, and the significance of his original contributions to poetics. Instructive here is Derek Attridge's discussion of the rhythmic principle of beats in Keats's work, which draws attention to the novelty of what Attridge calls the "nonce-compound": the unusual pairing of adjectives and verbs in new adjectival phrases.⁶ This concerns my study of uncertainty because, as Attridge shows, such expressions offer a plurality of possible scansions, as well as an "open-endedness" of semantic connections (*Moving Words*, p. 196). Simon Jarvis has likewise argued that out of *Endymion*'s "deep thicket of new verse rhythms, textures, sentences, techniques" come new modes of poetic thinking; Jarvis shows how the "intensively worked variety, contrast, and complexity" of Keats's verse-sentences cut through "the false partition dividing technique from thinking, craft from art."⁷ And Peter McDonald's work on Keats in *Sound Intentions: The Workings of Rhyme in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (2012) illustrates the uncertain relationship between repetition and prediction, tradition and innovation, and intentionality and accident that is opened up by rhyme, not least in the "stylistic indeterminacy" of *Endymion*.⁸ By drawing on these readings I aim to show that the sense of uncertainty that was so central to Keats's thinking around the time of the composition of *Endymion* is also central to the workings of its form.

⁶ See Derek Attridge, *Moving Words: Forms of English Poetry* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), pp. 188–202.

⁷ Simon Jarvis, "Endymion: The Text of Undersong," in *Constellations of a Contemporary Romanticism*, ed. Jacques Khalip and Forest Pyle (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2016), pp. 143, 154, 163.

⁸ Peter McDonald, *Sound Intentions: The Workings of Rhyme in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), p. 124.



“There’s no such thing as certainty, that’s plain.”⁹ Byron’s words, from Canto IX of *Don Juan* (1819), should be taken with more than a pinch of salt: ironically framed by the narrator, the line comes as part of a parody of Montaignean and Pyrrhonian skepticism, and leads to the conclusion that “So little do we know what we’re about in / This world, I doubt if doubt itself be doubting” (*Don Juan*, p. 414; Canto IX, ll. 135–36). Nevertheless, Byron was, in 1823, able to satirize skeptical doubt in popular verse because of the prevalence of skepticism in intellectual discourse at the time, and the century preceding Byron’s own can be broadly understood as a transition from certainty of thought to radical uncertainty. The start of the eighteenth century was marked by John Locke’s program for certain knowledge of the external world in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689); such security of ideas, though, was eroded by George Berkeley’s attack on matter and the “primary qualities” of things, and David Hume’s subsequent critique of mind and personal identity. For Hume, we can have no “constant and invariable” impression of ourselves, nor can we discern some soul-like substance that holds all our ideas in place, and there must remain an “uncertainty of our notion of identity” in the final analysis of ourselves.¹⁰ This is the critical method of skepticism that would prove so influential over the proceeding decades.

Scholars debate whether Keats can properly be termed a skeptic, and, despite his well-known remark that “nothing in this world is proveable,” it is notable that Keats does not use the word “scepticism” or its cognates in his poetry or prose.¹¹ He does, however, use the word “uncertainty” in several crucial

⁹ George Gordon Byron, *Don Juan*, in Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980–93), V, 414; Canto IX, l. 133.

¹⁰ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), p. 251.

¹¹ John Keats, letter to Benjamin Bailey, 13 March 1818, in *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), I, 242. For a recent overview of such scholarship, and an argument against Keatsian skepticism, see William A. Ulmer, “Negative Capability: Identity and Truth in Keats,” *Romanticism*, 25 (2019), 169–179.

places in his writings, and the thorny question of Keats's skepticism can be avoided, for present purposes, if we understand uncertainty as a component of philosophical skepticism, but not as its synonym. Lacking certain knowledge of a thing need not be understood as an actively skeptical position, for instance, but might be the neutral state prior to experience that is captured in the "tabula rasa" picture of the mind commonly associated with Locke. At any rate, no matter his relation to skepticism, Keats would have had access to discourses of uncertainty from a number of sources. James Vigus has shown the extent to which William Hazlitt's early *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805), a work that Keats read and came to own, is indebted to Humean uncertainty.¹² Keats also owned Voltaire's *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (1764), and Voltaire, like Hume, argues against the possibility of certain knowledge in subjects as diverse as religious and spiritual knowledge and the writing of history. The entry on "Certainty" ("*Certitude*") itself distinguishes between knowledge of ourselves and knowledge of external objects, the former striking Voltaire, in his Cartesian mindset, as being as certain as a mathematical proof, but the latter as only knowledge "founded on appearances," being only a matter of "probability."¹³ Both these works, among the relatively few volumes listed as being in Keats's ownership at the time of his death, connect the poet to an ongoing discourse of uncertainty.

Keats scholarship is familiar with uncertainty as a key term in his poetic thinking due to its role in one of the best-known sentences of one of his best-known letters:

several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in

¹² See James Vigus, "Hazlitt and Hume: Personal Identity as Imaginative Narration," in *Romantic Explorations*, ed. Michael Meyer (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2011), pp. 199–207. See also "List of Keats's Books," in *The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers, and More Letters and Poems of the Keats Circle*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2d ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), p. 258.

¹³ [Voltaire], *The Philosophical Dictionary* (Dublin: Bernard Dornin, 1793), p. 68.

uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.¹⁴

These words have already attracted a formidable volume of scholarship.¹⁵ However, I want to focus only on the role that uncertainty plays here: Keats notably places uncertainty within a temporal context when he elsewhere characterizes it as a period of life between childhood and adulthood. Such a conception of a temporary state of uncertainty would agree with the narrative of *Endymion*, wherein truth and beauty are, after all, finally attained when Endymion meets Cynthia at the close of Book IV—thus affirming Keats's own comment that the poem is "a regular stepping of the Imagination towards a Truth."¹⁶ When read with this kind of transitional state of uncertainty in mind, the "negative capability" letter can be understood as suggesting that the "Man of Achievement" should be able to endure such a transition without feeling the need to rectify that position by way of activity—to remain passively uncertain without actively (and irritably) reaching after fact. This is an aspect of negative capability that has earned it comparisons to the Wordsworthian notion of wise passiveness.¹⁷ Further, Seamus Perry connects this undecidedness to another letter of Keats's, in which he writes: "The only means of strengthening one's intellect is to make up one's mind about nothing—to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts. Not a select party."¹⁸ In this light, the transitional state of uncertainty can be seen to promote plural thinking—to eschew any single fixed position and so enter

¹⁴ John Keats, letter to George and Tom Keats, 21, 27 December 1817, in *The Letters of John Keats*, I, 193.

¹⁵ Recent works include Li Ou, *Keats and Negative Capability* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009); and *Keats's Negative Capability: New Origins and Afterlives*, ed. Brian Rejack and Michael Theune (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 2019). For a classic account, see Walter Jackson Bate, *Negative Capability: The Intuitive Approach in Keats* (New York: Contra Mundum Press, 2012).

¹⁶ John Keats, letter to John Taylor, 30 January 1818, in *The Letters of John Keats*, I, 218.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), p. 235.

¹⁸ John Keats, letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 17–27 September 1819, in *The Letters of John Keats*, II, 213. See Seamus Perry, "The Poetical Character," in *John Keats in Context*, ed. Michael O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2017), p. 182.

into multiple perspectives. By remaining uncertain—if only during our adolescent or liminal years, prior to maturation—we strengthen our mind’s capacity to entertain plural perspectives, and so, we can infer, we might cultivate emotional empathy and intersubjective understanding across party lines. Uncertainty, for Keats, thus carries an important ethical and ideological promise.

While Samuel Johnson’s primary definition of the noun “uncertainty” offers no major surprises (as simply a “want of knowledge”),¹⁹ a further definition is less obvious: to be “uncertain” is to be “unsettled, irregular.” Such a definition, pitted against the settled “regularity” of Augustan meters, has implications for a politicized poetics of uncertainty. It is well known that Keats’s friend and mentor Leigh Hunt wrote against the “school of Pope” in his *The Feast of the Poets* (1814), and Hunt explains that his own loosening of the heroic couplet was “an attempt to bring back the real harmonies of the English heroic, and to restore to it half the true principle of its music,—variety.”²⁰ “Variety” shares with “irregularity” both its connection to uncertainty—the absence of fixed rules, or fixity in general—and its implications for verse: accentual variety, or the irregular distribution of stressed syllables. Hunt’s critique of Alexander Pope’s versification fulfills the binary of bad singularity (e.g., “smoothness,” “want of variety”) versus good plurality (“contrast,” “change”). Hunt’s program for a “varied” poetics involves the introduction of caesural punctuation in places other than the fourth or fifth syllable of the lines, “accentual” variation (i.e., irregularity of stress patterns), as well as a shift in the alignment of sentence-units and lines; these are all rhythmic features that Keats also employed in *Endymion*. This suggests, then, that an underlying root of the aesthetic uncertainty in *Endymion* is found in Hunt’s poetic theory, and these aesthetic features further intertwine Keats’s work with Hunt’s political radicalism and antitraditionalism.

¹⁹ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*. 2 vols. (London: W. Strahan, 1755).

²⁰ [Leigh Hunt], “Notes on the Feast of the Poets,” in his *The Feast of the Poets, with Notes, and Other Pieces of Verse* (London: James Cawthorn, 1814), p. 28.

If allowing one's mind to "be a thoroughfare for all thoughts"—and so to enter into a poetic "way" of thinking and being—requires one first to entertain a state of philosophical uncertainty, then, it might be said, the best kind of poem is one that engineers in its readers just such a sense of uncertainty. With the description of the mind as "thoroughfare" we are already entering into the language of *Endymion* and its many pathways, which unfold as spatial metaphors for epistemological uncertainty. Paths and pathways are ever present in the narrative, as well as ever changing: they become blocked or obstructed, they are "buried" under woodland and rendered invisible (*Endymion*, p. 134; II, 73), they suddenly disappear or end "Abrupt in middle air" (p. 152; II, 653), or else are hard to identify in "dim" light (p. 154; II, 709). Part of what makes *Endymion's* path so uncertain is its plurality and its tendency to diverge, as it does in the forests of Latmos early in Book I:

Paths there were many,
Winding through palmy fern, and rushes fenny,
And ivy banks; all leading pleasantly
To a wide lawn, whence one could only see
Stems thronging all around between the swell
Of turf and slanting branches.

(p. 105; I, 79–84)

In the density of Keats's images of wilderness—the "swell" of turf and branches, ferns and fens—it is easy to overlook the fact that the manifold paths here all lead, pleasantly enough, to the same wide lawn. Part of the irresistible pull of *Endymion's* narrative, and part of its strangeness, is this fatalism: do what he may, Endymion is, apparently, destined to arrive at Cynthia's feet—as if no matter which path he chooses he cannot lose "his fated way" (p. 166; III, 119). But Endymion will hardly so much as make a choice, subjected as he is to external forces; he embodies, as Jarvis notes, a kind of "radical passivity" ("*Endymion: The Text of Undersong*," p. 147), buffeted back and forth against or with his will. Though Endymion moves by way of accidents and detours, it is as if, as later lines have it, "by mysterious enticement" the god Pan draws "Bewildered shepherds

to their path again" (*Endymion*, p. 110; I, 268–69). If the poem does represent the imagination "stepping" toward truth, then it matters that Endymion's steps remain uncertain until the close of Book IV; before realizing that Cynthia/Diana/Phoebe, the moon, and the Indian maid are all one and the same, it is necessary for Endymion to maintain the pluralistic uncertainty of what he calls his "triple soul" (p. 195; IV, 95).

The plurality of *Endymion*'s paths figures as a realization of one of the poem's more striking aspects of formal play: the irregularity of its verse sentences and poetic lines. Benjamin Bailey, writing several decades after the poem's publication, recalls Keats's "apparent effort, by breaking up the lines, to get as far as possible in the opposite direction of the Pope school."²¹ Croker, meanwhile, observes in his review that "there is hardly a complete couplet inclosing a complete idea in the whole book."²² What is being criticized is the highly enjambed nature of Keats's couplets, in which sentence units rarely correspond with line endings. Croker's critique is itself built on a notably Lockean assumption. For Locke, meaningful language use depends on the annexing of "clear and distinct" ideas to words; words without clear ideas are, by Locke's definition, nonsensical.²³ Likewise, for Croker, a meaningful or functional couplet is one that acts as a pellucid vessel for a clear and distinct idea. What this suggests is that Keats's couplets were understood by his early critics to be working against the aesthetic ideals of Augustan poetry, but also against the implied epistemology of such poetics: against the notions of clearly isolatable ideas and certain knowledge.

Keats's revisioning of the heroic couplet, built as it is on Hunt's principle of "variety," plays a role in the generation of uncertainty by opening up a semantic gap between sentence and line, contrary to the Popean couplet. Consider the poem's opening:

²¹ Benjamin Bailey, letter to R. M. Milnes, 7 May 1849, in *The Keats Circle*, II, 269.

²² [John Wilson Croker], rev. of *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*, by John Keats, *Quarterly Review*, 19 (1818), 206.

²³ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 491.

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
 Its loveliness increases; it will never
 Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
 A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
 Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.
 (*Endymion*, p. 103; I, 1–5)

From the very beginning, Keats wants to do all he can to resist anything like Augustan “harmony” by allowing his sentences to freely overflow the borders of lines. Not only do the clauses of the above verse sentence fail, for the most part, to align with the ends of each line, but they are also of varying lengths among themselves. Such enjambed lines would not be strongly objectionable (as they were to Keats’s early reviewers) were it not for the presence of end-rhymes. But the rhymes make it so that we cannot choose but hear the end of each line, even as the sentences hasten us past. The result of this mismatch is that we are made starkly aware of the need to decide whether to follow rhythm or sentence. At the extreme, if we follow the rhythm, we read:

Its loveliness increases it will never—
 Pass into nothingness but still will keep—
 A bower quiet for us and a sleep—
 Full of sweet dreams and health, and quiet breathing.

And if we follow the sentence flow, we read:

Its loveliness increases;
 it will never pass into nothingness;
 but still will keep a bower quiet for us,
 and a sleep full of sweet dreams,
 and health,
 and quiet breathing.

These two exaggerated “readings” of the opening lines, one in the thrall of rhythm and line, one obedient to sentence flow and the sequencing of clauses, are the products of the “two antagonistic forces” that Jarvis identifies in the poem: “a diffusive force, in which the proliferation of clauses and subclauses allows the verse sentence to meander and to disperse its energies, and a propulsive force, in which syntax, punctuation, and meter drive the sentence powerfully on

through these rills and dells" (*Endymion: The Text of Under-song*, p. 159). Crucially, this is an aesthetic feature of the poem, but it is also a philosophic one. Where A. D. Nuttall points to Keats's willfully enjambed couplets as the inverse of Pope's sought correspondence between "sense units" and "metrical units,"²⁴ we might question whether meter really is distinct from sense as handled by those poets. One very real and meaningful consequence of the shifts in emphases that are required of, or encouraged by, an adherence to either line or sentence is that our attention will naturally shift for each, and so different emphases in "sense" will arise. Separated from the word "Never" by the start of a new line, the fragmented clause "*Pass into nothingness*" carries a discernible undertone of deathliness within the warmth of those opening lines. Equally, the line break after "and a sleep" has us lingering over the deeper poetic connotations of sleep itself—the Hamletian "rub" of the subject at hand. The result is that there is a proleptic sense of "the unhealthy and o'er-darkened ways" of the poem's tenth line (*Endymion*, p. 103; I, 10) even in the "health, and quiet breathing" of its fifth. Through the interplay of the diffusive and propulsive forces of sentence and line alone, Keats is subtly able to introduce impermanence into his poem within the very lines where he affirms, most famously, the permanence of beautiful things.

Keats's relation of sentence to line deepens an already appreciable gap between rhythmical reality and metrical ideality: between the fluvial movements of a poem's surface and the rigors of the meter that underpin it. In doing so, it alerts us to the possibility of plural readings of the poem, of different emphases and enunciations that might carry us down differing avenues of meaning. On the topic of Shakespeare's enjambments, Mark Womack writes: "That doubling of pattern requires our minds to do two things at once: hear the iambic pentameter line and hear the syntax of the sentence."²⁵ Enjambment can ask us to hear and also think two things at once; we are unlikely to read Keats's poem quite like either of

²⁴ A. D. Nuttall, *Pope's "Essay on Man"* (London: HarperCollins, 1984), p. 24.

²⁵ Mark Womack, "Shakespearean Prosody Unbound," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 45 (2003), 13.

the above examples, but his experimental poetics constantly tugs us between two paths even as it hurtles us forward. Keats's sentences shore up the actuality of the poem's rhythmical movements, while the presence of rhyme pulls us back toward metrical ideality. This results in a kind of readerly cognitive dissonance, where we are constantly being lured in two directions at once—the kind of open-ended poetic “choice” that Attridge uncovers in Keats's adjectival compounds (*Moving Words*, p. 196), as mentioned above. This is an experience of form that has obvious ramifications for discussions of *Endymion* as a conflict of realism and idealism, or as a socially aware drama or a pure dreamscape. The uncertainty of the sentence-line relationship is born of its own refusal of certain knowledge, in its resistance to the implicit epistemology of the balanced heroic couplet as far as Hunt, for one, saw it, and thus provides dissonant and diverging paths through the narrative of Keats's poem.

The force of rhyme enables Keats's line endings to be felt, against the strong pull of his sentences. Rhyme, though, has a second function in the generation of *Endymion*'s uncertainty: it distorts and dissolves the materiality of words. It is well known that Keats took liberties when pairing words or phrases for his couplets in *Endymion*, wherein “angular” rhymes with “meteor-star,” and “clear-eyed fish” is a match for “purplish.” There are several reasons as to why a poet might settle, or even aim, for such rhymes, ones that display “a considerable divorce between poetic principle and phonetic fact.”²⁶ Lynda Mugglestone contends that such deviances from pronunciation might stem from a veneration of writing over speaking, so that eye-rhymes become a fixture of “Cockney” poetics (“The Fallacy of the Cockney Rhyme,” p. 57). However, Garrett Stewart has argued that Keats is not among such graphically preoccupied writers, pointing to the frequency of “phonetic rather than semantic byplay” in his poems.²⁷ Such rhymes, though, and their bridging of the phonic and the graphic dimensions of signs, are crucial to the poetic project of *Endymion*. The poem begins

²⁶ Lynda Mugglestone, “The Fallacy of the Cockney Rhyme: From Keats and Earlier to Auden,” *Review of English Studies*, 42 (1991), 57.

²⁷ Garrett Stewart, “Keats and Language,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), p. 136.

without controversy, as far as rhyme-words go, and the rhyme of “for ever” and “never” is of the order that Hugh Kenner calls “reasonable”—offering a semantic as well as a rhymed correspondence, through “permanence / impermanence” or “temporality” in general.²⁸ Trouble begins in the poem’s second stanza:

Nor do we merely feel these essences
 For one short hour; no, even as the trees.
 (*Endymion*, p. 104; I, 25–26)

Treating “essences” and “trees” as a homophonic pair is a stretch, and while a case could be made that the words do rhyme, they clearly do not do so in the same way as “for ever” and “never.” It is also weak as an eye-rhyme, depending as it does on the reader’s unhooking of “-es” from the monosyllable “trees.” Due to the fact that “essences” precedes “trees,” we are likely to sound it as “*ess-en-sez*” before discovering that it is intended to rhyme with “-eeze.” The sequence of the rhyme-words invites us to review and revise how we pronounce “essences”—to go back and see or say it differently. The attention we give “essence” matters, because it will be a key term in the poem. Endymion’s question to his sister Peona, glossed by Keats in his January 1818 letter to John Taylor as part of the poem’s “Pleasure Thermometer” (*The Letters of John Keats*, I, 218), is often taken to be the central line of inquiry of the poem: “Wherein lies happiness?” (*Endymion*, p. 125; I, 777). Endymion’s own answer begins as follows:

In that which becks
 Our ready minds to fellowship divine,
 A fellowship with essence; till we shine,
 Full alchemiz’d.
 (p. 125; I, 777–80)

Happiness lies in whatever calls our minds to meet with “essence”—a dissolution and redistribution of spirit or selfhood that is helped along by the fact that “essences” has already changed its shape before our eyes.

²⁸ See Hugh Kenner, “Pope’s Reasonable Rhymes,” *ELH*, 41 (1974), 74–88.

Such alchemical transformations are a regular feature of *Endymion's* narrative, both in its rhymes as well as its images. An uncommon triple rhyme displays this theme, in Keats's retelling of the myth of Alpheus and Arethusa:

thence to run
 In amorous rilletts down her shrinking form!
 To linger on her lily shoulders, warm
 Between her kissing breasts, and every charm
 Touch raptur'd!

(*Endymion*, p. 161; II, 944–48)

From *form* to *warm* into *charm*, an aural rhyme is transformed into a visual rhyme, one that asks us to think about different experiences of “form” while at the same moment preempting Arethusa’s own transformation into a fountain. Elsewhere, the straining rhyme of “Morpheus” and “muse” similarly invites us to reflect on the poetic transformation of basic form (“Morpheus,” from the Greek for “shape” or form). Likewise, the frequent appearances and disappearances of characters and supernatural beings are marked by rhyme. When, in the poem’s final movements, Endymion’s beloved maiden fades and then “melts” into thin air, a line ends with the isolated clause “—he was alone” (p. 267; IV, 510). This solitariness is, crucially, emphasized by the fact that this is one of only a few unrhymed lines in the poem, and in more than one sense do we experience a disruptive uncoupling that leaves Endymion hanging on his own. When Endymion pursues a butterfly at the start of Book II, he finds that it disappears at his touch, only to be replaced with a woodland nymph; the nymph tells him that, to find his love, he needs to “wander far,” before she herself disappears (p. 136; II, 123). These dematerializations, of butterfly and then of nymph, are accompanied by distortions in the poem’s rhymes. The butterfly’s disappearance leaves Endymion “Bewildered,” a word that is then rhymed with the phrase “shook each bed” (p. 135; II, 93–94)—taking the sound in a different direction than was expected. Butterflies themselves are to be treated with suspicion, after they are caught rhyming with “strawberries” (p. 110; I, 257), only for “flies” to be rhymed with “surprise” five lines later, flitting from eye-to ear-

rhyme in the process. Keats cannot be said to have invented such unconventional rhymes, which bend the shape and sounds of words, but he makes a uniquely sustained use of them in the poem's images of transformations and dematerializations.

It is worth briefly asking what the presence of rhyme does to a poem. McDonald writes: "Rhyme puts limits—limits which a poet is not free to set—on what intention in writing can achieve" (*Sound Intentions*, p. 6). In asserting this thesis on the influence that rhyme exerts over poetic intentionality, McDonald acknowledges three fundamental bearings that rhyme has on poetry: one, it places a strict limit on the vocabulary available to the poet, at least at the local level of line endings; two, it creates or explicates apparent connections between one or more entities or properties, thus holding them up for comparison, consideration, or contrast; and three, rhyme echoes just as much as it preempts or predicts. This limiting capacity of rhyme invites the kind of easily politicized metaphors to which John Milton turned when describing "the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming," and that have proven to be influential.²⁹ But it also invites a spatial metaphor. Pondering the question "Why endeavour after a long Poem," Keats answers with a question of his own: "Do not the Lovers of Poetry like to have a little Region to wander in where they may pick and choose . . . ?"³⁰ Perhaps the emphasis should be on the "little" in that sentence: do not poetry lovers like their liberty in limited doses? Keats would similarly reflect, in verse, on the "fetter'd" freedom of the sonnet, proposing that "if we may not let the Muse be free, / She will be bound with garlands of her own."³¹ These remarks concern poetic form in general but rhyme especially, and Keats's sonnet suggests that it is the "dull" in the titular "dull rhymes" that is the problem.

Today, were we seeking a rhyme word to partner with, for instance, the word "anxiety," we could type that word into an online rhyming dictionary such as *RhymeZone*, which would

²⁹ John Milton, "The Verse" (1668 note), in *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler, 2d ed. (London and New York: Longman, 1998), p. 55.

³⁰ John Keats, letter to Benjamin Bailey, 8 October 1817, in *The Letters of John Keats*, I, 170.

³¹ John Keats, "If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd," in *The Poems of John Keats*, p. 368, lines 13–14.

algorithmically produce for us such a delineated “zone” of rhyme.³² Nowhere in its scanty plot would we find the word “nigh.” Keats, in the late 1810s, would have had to entrust himself to a work such as John Walker’s popular *Rhyming Dictionary* (1775, revised 1806), or Walker’s follow-up *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* (1791).³³ The *Rhyming Dictionary* is actually a “reverse” dictionary, promoting eye-rhymes over aural echoes; the *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* rectified that shortcoming by focusing on phonetics (though it does not group sounds together). Again, the rhyme “nigh” for “anxiety” is not available to either of Walker’s books—indeed, Walker’s system illustrates that “nigh” should rhyme with the first stressed syllable of “anxiety,” but not the second. The rhyme of “anxiety / nigh” (*Endymion*, p. 137; II, 154–55), which is hardly the most outrageous pairing in *Endymion*, slips past the logic of both of Walker’s systems, of lookalike and soundalike words. This is in itself socially, if not politically, interesting: Walker’s books assume a close relation between “errors in Grammar, as well as Politics,” and Walker pits his work against “that feeble, cockney pronunciation, which is so disagreeable to a correct ear” (*A Critical Pronouncing Dictionary*, pp. iii, 46).

Rhyme thus serves Keats by adumbrating a set of limits that might be “a test, a trial of [his] Powers of Imagination,” as he says in his October 1817 letter to Bailey (*The Letters of John Keats*, I, 169): rhyme sets up the little region in which the poet can roam, and the poet’s task is to find a novel way out to pastures new. As with the relation of sentence and line in *Endymion*, this feature of rhythm is reflected in the poem’s narrative movements. Jarvis notes “the continuous provision of divine or random bailouts and exits to *Endymion*” (“*Endymion: The Text of Undersong*,” p. 147). When *Endymion* is looking for a way into the sky in Book IV, he is fortunate enough that “from the turf outsprang two steeds jet-black” (*Endymion*, p. 202; IV, 343); he

³² “RhymeZone rhyming dictionary and thesaurus,” accessed 9 June 2020; available online at <<https://www.rhymezone.com/>>.

³³ See John Walker, *A Dictionary of the English Language, Answering at Once the Purposes of Rhyming, Spelling, and Pronouncing* (London: T. Becket, 1775); and John Walker, *A Critical Pronouncing Dictionary and Expositor of the English Language* (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, and T. Cadell, 1791). Walker’s 1775 dictionary is better known by the title of the second edition: J. Walker, *A Rhyming Dictionary; Answering, at the Same Time, the Purposes of Spelling and Pronouncing the English Language*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1806).

and his maid ride these horses, each of which by good fortune has “large dark blue wings” (l. 344), onward to the Cave of Quietude. When he is concerned that he is lost at the bottom of the ocean, Endymion falls into a swoon and is carried back to dry land by a band of sea nymphs (p. 191; III, 1015–18). When Endymion discovers that the path he is following has run out “in middle air” (p. 152; II, 656), he makes the snap decision to leap onto a passing eagle, and together they fall: “Down, down, *uncertain* to what pleasant doom” (l. 661; emphasis added). These movements mirror the movements of Keats’s rhymes, and his attitude to rhyme thus reflects William Wordsworth’s attitude in his “Prefatory Sonnet” (1802): “In truth, the prison, unto which we doom / Ourselves, no prison is.”³⁴ Rhyme thus comes to represent a softening of textual walls that will, on occasion, allow the hero to pass unimpeded where impediment was anticipated. As Endymion dooms himself, pleasantly, to the throes of rhyme, the phrase “down he fell” is paired with the scent of “asphodel” (*Endymion*, p. 152; II, 662–63)—a variety of lily that appears when Endymion, surprisingly, lands safely in a mossy bower. The poet is not, in McDonald’s words, “free to set” the limits of rhyme, but given enough inventiveness he or she can test, even stretch, those limitations. Keats’s liberal approach to rhyming can thus provide for Endymion a get-out clause, a free card, an escape hatch, a secret switch—or, in the poem’s images, a cavern that opens unexpectedly into the bowels of the earth, a handily appearing “youthful wight” (p. 184; III, 775), or the supporting and interwoven arms of Nereids. By constantly checking the reader’s assumptions about the sounds and shapes of words, and by apparently bending the limits of a word’s capacity to rhyme, *Endymion* messes with the materiality of language itself, offering an immaterialist approach to rhyme. If, in the broader Romantic view, “words are things,”³⁵ then *Endymion*’s things are subject to sudden and unexpected change; they are, in Keats’s handling, uncertain things.

³⁴ William Wordsworth, “Nuns fret not at their Convent’s narrow room,” in *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800–1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983), p. 133, lines 8–9.

³⁵ See William Keach, *Arbitrary Power: Romanticism, Language, Politics* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004), pp. 23–45.

The immaterialist and transformative quality of Keats's rhymes extend to the character of Endymion himself, whose name is subject to repeated mishandling by poetic rhythm. He is first introduced to the narrative in the third paragraph of Book I:

Therefore, 'tis with full happiness that I
Will trace the story of Endymion.
The very music of the name has gone
Into my being, and each pleasant scene
Is growing fresh before me as the green
Of our own vallies: so I will begin.

(*Endymion*, p. 104; I, 34-39)

Endymion's initial appearance is accompanied not with a judgment on his character or a remark on his physical aspect, but with a comment on the sound of his name. It is easy to imagine that Keats had in mind something like the "poetical music" that Hunt outlines in the notes to *The Feast of the Poets*—that which was to be perfected through the principle of variety ("Notes on the Feast of the Poets," p. 27). Happily, by its occurrence at a line's end in its initial appearance, rhythm and rhyme amply provide clues as to the pronunciation of the name: En-*dym*-ee-on, to rhyme with *gone*. The pronunciation implied by the poem's rhythm thus accords with that provided in another of John Walker's works, the extraordinary *Key to the Classical Pronunciation of Greek and Latin Proper Names* of 1798; Walker's "En-dym'i-on," following the rules outlined in his introduction, places stress most strongly on the second syllable ("dym"), and extends the "i" syllable to be sounded "ee."³⁶ Keats's "Endymion" only differs from Walker's, if at all, in the implied strength of the second stress on "-on"—the natural consequence of its falling at a line's end; in other words, the initial appearance of Endymion brings to attention the orthodox pronunciation of his name.

Having taken the care both to draw attention to the sound of Endymion's name and to offer a primer for how exactly it

³⁶ John Walker, *A Key to the Classical Pronunciation of Greek and Latin Proper Names* (London: Robinsons, T. Cadell, W. Davies, 1798), p. 31.

should be said, Keats complicates the “Endymion” rhyme in a speech given by the goddess Venus in Book III:

“And pray persuade with thee—Ah, I have done,
All blisses be upon thee, my sweet son!”—
Thus the fair goddess: while Endymion
Knelt to receive those accents halcyon.

Meantime a glorious revelry began
Before the Water-Monarch. Nectar ran.

(*Endymion*, p. 188; III, 920–25)

It is worth appreciating the rhyme of “Endymion” with “halcyon” within the context of its surrounding couplets, which form a string of transformative rhymes—indeed, it is not often acknowledged that Keats is very fond of such chains of rhymes, where sounds transform across strings of rhyme words rather than simply settling into pairs. For instance, the chain of rhymes *days / blaze / blades / fades / brain / amain* (p. 132; II, 7–12) is connected by a steely thread of assonance in the “ay” vowel sound, and strengthened by the sonic turn from “blaze” to “blades.” In Venus’s speech above, “done” ends up bending into the sound of “ran,” via a rare quadruple rhyme that includes Endymion’s name. Walker’s *Pronouncing Dictionary* confirms that “halcyon” is a fit rhyme for “done” and “son,” and so the earlier pronunciation of “Endymi-on” now appears to be revised to “Endymi-un”—indeed, it is emphatically revised, thanks to the reassuring presence of three corresponding sounds.

Part of the poetic appeal of multisyllabic names is their rhythmic flexibility, and this subtle variation would hardly matter if Endymion had not been first introduced to us by the music of his name. If that music really does have the power to “enter into” another’s being, then what does it mean that it is already not the same as when last it was heard? The name is, here, once again associated with rhythm, thanks to its rhymed correspondence with “accents halcyon” (in reference to Venus’s serene voice). Johnson’s *Dictionary* informs us that “accent” can refer to general pronunciation, syllabic stress more particularly, or even specifically poetic language, and it is telling that the word twice accompanies Endymion’s name; elsewhere he states: “I heard my name

/ Most fondly lipp'd, and then these accents came" (*Endymion*, p. 131; I, 964–65). Once again, Keats puts energy into drawing attention not just to Endymion's name, but to the sounds of his name when spoken. Venus also begins her discourse by speaking his name: "Endymion! Ah! still wandering in the bands / Of love? Now this is cruel" (p. 188; III, 903–4). To read Venus's words in accordance with five-beat rhythm, we must elide both "Endymion" and "wandering" ("Endym'yun," "wand'ring"). Wandering in the bands of love, constricted by the binds of meter, Endymion has fallen to become a source of pity. The shape of his name will fluctuate across the poem, as he is tossed and turned by the poem's rhythms.

Though Keats is by no stretch the first poet to have changed the pronunciation of a name or word within a single poem, *Endymion* is unusually, and strikingly, persistent in this area:

He who died
 For soaring too audacious in the sun,
 When that same treacherous wax began to run,
 Felt not more tongue-tied than Endymion.
 His heart leapt up as to its rightful throne,
 To that fair shadow'd passion puls'd its way—
 Ah, what perplexity! Ah, well a day!
 (*Endymion*, p. 205; IV, 441–47)

This is, surely, an example of Keatsian playfulness. In these lines—which maintain an unusually orderly relation of clauses to line endings—"sun," a perfect homophone for Endymion's earlier rhyme of "son," leads into what looks to be another string of four rhymed words; yet when we arrive at the fourth rhyme we discover, in the manner of one of Keats's transformative rhymes, that Endymion has once more shape-shifted. Susan Wolfson identifies *sun / run / Endymion* as one of Keats's rare triple rhymes, but acknowledges in a footnote that "the rhymes are actually *sun-run, Endymion-throne*"; that second couplet, indeed, "is a sight rhyme at best."³⁷ That judgment concedes that *Endymion-throne* does not really meet the demands of eye-rhyme at any technical level—the

³⁷ Susan J. Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986), p. 230n.

level, for instance, of Walker's *Rhyming Dictionary*. Continuing discussion of this rhyme, Wolfson turns to Keats's short lyric "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill" (1817), which rhymes the name "Endymion" with both "won" and "gone," and to Book II of *Endymion*, which rhymes "gone" with "passion" (*Endymion*, p. 144; II, 375–76); thus, "even the *Endymion-gone* couplet may be resolved phonetically in favor of an *un* sound" (Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence*, p. 230n).³⁸ We might ask, though, what kind of resolution this is, which bends the sound of "gone" to form its rhymes, and which accordingly requires us to accept "*thrun*" as a reasonable pronunciation for "throne." "Thrones" has, at any rate, already been rhymed with "tones" in the opening to Book III (*Endymion*, p. 163; III, 15–16). In one of his few prose publications unattached to a volume of poetry, Keats connects the "negative capability" he saw in Shakespeare's plays with the social and political "uncertainty and fear" he sensed around him in 1817, in the fitful "turbulence" of characters as portrayed onstage by Edmund Kean.³⁹ In like spirit, the pluralistic and shifting rhymes for "Endymion" resist resolution, tugging between eye-rhymes and ear-rhymes and making it so that the character seems never to settle fully or fit in with his surroundings. And the fact remains that, according to Walker if not our own ears, none of the following words rhyme with one another: gone, run, throne. All are made, by Keats, to rhyme with "Endymion."

Citing precedent does not help us gain purchase on the music of *Endymion*'s name precisely because Keats's game is to unsettle that which comes before. McDonald observes that rhyme is always, to some extent, multidirectional in the perspective it encourages: "a rhyme-word casts itself forwards into the next lines of a poem, but it is also a mode of listening backwards within the poem, so that every rhymed utterance is also an echo of itself" (*Sound Intentions*, p. 12). If rhyme is always looking backward, then it "can appear to be in league with an underlying conservatism"—opposed to progress, and involved in regress (McDonald, *Sound Intentions*, p. 12). But what if, in the activity

³⁸ See John Keats, "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill," in *The Poems of John Keats*, p. 86.

³⁹ John Keats, "Mr. Kean" (1817), in *Keats's Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts, Criticism*, ed. Jeffrey N. Cox (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2009), pp. 105–6.

of looking backward, the thing we had taken for granted has since changed its appearance? Rhyme functions on a set of expectations, and on established precedent, and it is precisely such assumptions that Keats's rhymes routinely disturb. To attempt to "resolve" Keats's more challenging rhymes on behalf of the poet is to look for universal order and fixed laws where they are not likely to be found. The rhyme *Endymion-throne* is structured in such a way that we understand it to be a variety of (almost) eye-rhyme, but it also challenges rhyme's authority, and Keats was not simply looking for words that would suffice as rhymes for "Endymion"; if that were the case, he would not have felt the need to draw attention, repeatedly and emphatically, to the musicality of the name. He might even have gone as far as Percy Bysshe Shelley, who audaciously rhymes "Endymion" with its partner, "moon," in *Epipsychidion* (1821).⁴⁰ Instead, Keats exposes the exacting pressures of rhyme and rhythm as they manipulate and manhandle Endymion over the course of his journey, and such rhythmical changes are everywhere in the proper names of the poem. When the narrator recounts the story of Niobe being turned to stone, it is with the lines "And frantic gape of lonely Niobe, / Poor, lonely Niobe! when her lovely young" (*Endymion*, p. 112; I, 338–39). Her name is necessarily altered between lines under the influence of rhythm, from the line-ending trisyllabic "NI-oh-BEE" to the more easily accommodated "NI-obe." Endymion himself is later led, "Along a path between two little streams" (p. 114; I, 415), by his sister, who appears to him "like some midnight spirit nurse / Of happy changes in emphatic dreams" (p. 115; I, 413–14). Given the unfamiliarity we will likely feel for midnight spirit nurses, this is a difficult simile to follow; what it does, though, is underscore both the change and the pleasure in change to which Endymion is subject. Early in Book I, a "change" wrought in Endymion is rhymed with "What indeed more strange?" (p. 118; I, 520–21). This serves as a turn to the reader: what more strange, indeed, than the malleable and molten character of this young man, on his journey toward beauty and truth?

⁴⁰ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts, Criticism*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1977), p. 381, ll. 293–94.

There is no question that Keats had it in his poetical powers to emphasize change and transformation through the resources of rhythm. In Book II we follow Endymion “Through winding passages, where sameness breeds / Vexing conceptions of some sudden change” (*Endymion*, p. 139; II, 235–36); these lines clearly explicate the experience of “sudden change,” but they also perform it. That first line is about as regular as Keats’s pentameter will get, in that it paces out in iambic sequence; the subsequent line, however, abruptly breaks that regularity by introducing a four-beat rhythm: “Vexing conceptions of some *sudden change*.” It is even possible to scan this as dactylic meter, if we are happy to promote “same” at the expense of “sudden”: “Vexing conceptions of *some sudden change*.” However we read it, the rhythm of the previous line is clearly, and jarringly, changed. These altered states and moods, managed through the complexities of Keats’s rhythms, are direct products of the textual uncertainty I have been tracing, and the ability to accept or even invite change in oneself is a key part of Endymion’s progress. In the well-known letter in which Keats outlines his “Axioms” for poetry, he affirms psychological uncertainty through the image of “the Luxury of twilight”;⁴¹ it is “in twilight lone” that Endymion is left in Book II (*Endymion*, p. 150; II, 587), and that phrase introduces to the narrative an arresting description of subterranean fountains:

Long he dwells
 On this delight; for, every minute’s space,
 The streams with changed magic interlace:
 Sometimes like delicatest lattices,
 Cover’d with crystal vines; then weeping trees,
 Moving about as in a gentle wind,
 Which, in a wink, to watery gauze refin’d,
 Pour’d into shapes of curtain’d canopies,
 Spangled, and rich with liquid broideries
 Of flowers, peacocks, swans, and naiads fair.
 (p. 151; II, 611–20)

⁴¹ John Keats, letter to John Taylor, 27 February 1818, in *The Letters of John Keats*, I, 238.

The assonance in *streams*, *lattices*, and *trees* performs the changing music of interlacing jets of water, a sound that leaps a couplet before splashing down again in *canopies* and *broideries*. Christopher Ricks draws attention to “the interlacing by which ‘lace’ is woven into both of the words ‘delicatest lattices.’”⁴² In fact, the beheaded “-licatest” is actually a perfect anagram of “lattices”—a permutation of the letters, and a marker (were one needed) of the intensity of focus that Keats brought to local as well as general aspects of form. The image offers at once, as Ricks puts it, “a ‘changèd music’ for the ear and fluid streams for the eye” (“Shakespeare and the Anagram,” p. 118). The narrative function of these “founts Protean” (*Endymion*, p. 151; II, 627) is twofold: they underscore the general virtue of “change” as it arises out of uncertainty (itself a synonym of “changeability”); and they show that, by way of a wise passiveness, external change can impress itself on the self. Endymion, watching the “huge and strange” sights before him, does indeed feel “a hurried change / Working within him” (p. 151; II, 633–34), which turns out to be a momentary despondency, brought on by a sublime sense of his own insignificance. Yet, as he keeps watching, “he revives”: “for who beholds / New sudden things, nor casts his mental slough?” (p. 151; II, 637–38). Endymion is not just cheered by the world around him, but is actively changed in spirit, and the Protean forms of the interlacing waters above him stand as symbols of his own changeable moods and changeful nature.

It is this changefulness that returns us to the question of Keats and politics. In the course of a discussion of the politicized terms used by early critics of *Endymion*, Nicholas Roe draws attention to a description of Keats’s style in the *Edinburgh Magazine*: “vivacious, smart, witty, changeful, sparkling, and learned.”⁴³ Of those terms, “changeful” stands out as one that might only be ambiguously positive; it means, according to Johnson’s *Dictionary*, “inconstant; uncertain; mutable; subject

⁴² Christopher Ricks, “Shakespeare and the Anagram,” in *Proceedings of the British Academy: 2002 Lectures* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, and The British Academy, 2003), p. 118.

⁴³ [Anon.], rev. of *Poems*, by John Keats, *Edinburgh Magazine*, 1 (1817), 256. See Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent*, p. 220.

to variation; fickle.” This suggests, as Roe has argued, that early reviewers were sensitive to the fact that “Keats’s vocabulary, poetic idiom, and style were intensely freighted with moral, social, and political meanings” (*John Keats and the Culture of Dissent*, p. 221). In part, as noted above, this poetics of uncertainty carries an ideological potency due to its association with Hunt, and in the resistance it shows toward Popean harmony or Wordsworthian blank verse. And in its broader historical context, the prioritization of an epistemological uncertainty places Keats within the same intellectual vector as Hume and Voltaire, whose own displacement of certain knowledge was consonant with their anticlericalism and attacks on religious dogma. But, as William Keach observes, “where the specific political context of Keats’s Cockney couplets ceases to be immediately instructive, the stylistic instincts encouraged and shaped by that context may produce writing with an important though momentarily suppressed political dimension.”⁴⁴ One political analogy lies in the liberality of those “loose liberal couplets” (Keach, “Cockney Couplets,” p. 183). But the aesthetic uncertainty I have pursued through Keats’s revolutionary approach to rhythm and rhyme has its own implications for our understanding of Keats’s poetics of dissent: the politics of changefulness. In his September 1819 letter to George and Georgiana Keats, Keats wrote: “All civiled countries become gradually more enlighten’d and there should be a continual change for the better” (*The Letters of John Keats*, II, 193). As Fermanis has argued, this is an unequivocal assertion of the notion of enlightenment as historical progress—a progressive’s view of history. The desire for the substitution of one thing for another, better one is the basic tenet of social reform, and *Endymion* not only suggests that such change is possible, but also that it is a vital condition of life. Keats’s aesthetic approach to uncertainty involves a logic complementary to such an attitude or perspective, wherein it is always possible to re-form the world around the individual, provided that that individual is also ready to subject him- or herself to the laws of mutability.

⁴⁴ William Keach, “Cockney Couplets: Keats and the Politics of Style,” *Studies in Romanticism*, 25 (1986), 196.

Seen in this light, Endymion's uncertain path is, like the uncertain state of negatively capable being, a path toward change.



Fredric Jameson's well-known injunction to "always historicize!"⁴⁵ was always meant to be read with the supplementary clause "... because that is how we get at a political understanding of a text." But while the rise of New Historicism over the last forty or so years has largely been coincident with a turn to the political element in literary works, Keats's own handling by New Historicist critics got off to a notably rocky start. Jerome McGann's treatment of the "Ode to Autumn" (1820) in his 1979 essay "Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism" did more than any other work to set in stone the notion that Keats was in formal terms an emphatically nonpolitical thinker, whose "escape" into a world of pure aesthetics around the time of, among other events, the Peterloo massacre marks him not just as apolitical but as politically "reactionary."⁴⁶ Historicist contextualism provided the litmus test for a poet's political worth, and Keats, unlike Byron, Shelley, or the early Wordsworth, was found a conservative on the grounds of his ahistorical aestheticism. A decade after McGann's study, Marjorie Levinson's *Keats's Life of Allegory* (1988) returned to the historical investigation of Keats's poetry and again found it to be "stylistically self-indulgent verse," "overwrought" in form to the extent that it refused political content.⁴⁷ Subsequent meditations on the question of Keats's relations to politics have duly felt the need to rise to the New Historicist challenge and to prove Keats's political worth by revealing a correspondence between his texts and their immediate social context. Morris Dickstein, ushering in a new generation of Keats scholarship that is interested in the

⁴⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), p. 9.

⁴⁶ Jerome McGann, "Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism," *MLN*, 94 (1979), 1017.

⁴⁷ Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 3.

political question, directly responds to McGann's essay when he writes that "the evasion of politics is also a significant political gesture, especially in a period of reaction like the Regency era."⁴⁸ Jeffrey N. Cox went a step further, understanding Keats's aestheticism in the context of Hunt and the "Cockney School," and so implicating Keats in a larger radical movement.⁴⁹ Cox's *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School* is a New Historicist effort to prove Keats's connections to Hunt's circle of radicals, even after the 1820 poems that McGann dubbed reactionary. What is notable in these efforts is that understanding Keats's political element also appears to entail rescuing him from his own aesthetic element, and from that apparent escapism diagnosed by McGann.

To a scholar working today, it may be surprising to read McGann's description of a landscape of literary studies wherein "most historical critics have been driven from the field" ("Keats and Historical Method," p. 988). Now, so strong is the imperative to historicize that the obverse would appear to be more true. Indeed, as Andrew Hadfield has written, there is in modern literary scholarship "a genuine concern that an excessive concentration on historical context may be obscuring the proper role of aesthetic principles in literary studies."⁵⁰ This concern is not entirely Hadfield's own, but what he proposes is that historicism should take more seriously the histories of style and form—of the immediacies of text as well as context—so that, "instead of being the obstacle to aesthetic experience, historicism could become its main spur" ("Has Historicism Gone Too Far," p. 35). Whether because of "new historicism's alleged denunciation of form as an ideological mystification" or simply as "an unfortunate by-product of the institutional authority enjoyed by the historical turn,"⁵¹ explicitly formalist criticism has been slow to return to the mainstreams of

⁴⁸ Morris Dickstein, "Keats and Politics," *Studies in Romanticism*, 25 (1986), 176.

⁴⁹ See Jeffrey N. Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and Their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998).

⁵⁰ Andrew Hadfield, "Has Historicism Gone Too Far: Or, Should We Return to Form?," in *Rethinking Historicism from Shakespeare to Milton*, ed. Ann Baynes Coiro and Thomas Fulton (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012), p. 31.

⁵¹ Marjorie Levinson, "What Is New Formalism?," *PMLA*, 122 (2007), 559.

Romanticist scholarship. Nevertheless, the desire expressed by Hadfield is shared by the recent proliferation of studies done under the banner of “historical poetics”: the historicist mode that puts form at its center, or the formalism that always historicizes, and so understands that elements like rhyme have their own weighty histories.⁵² My adoption in the title of this essay of the word “aesthetic” serves to signal at once those three coconspirators of uncertainty—line, rhyme, rhythm—but also to gesture toward the overall experience of reading *Endymion*: the aesthetic encounter we enter into with the text. By reading *Endymion* from the old-fashioned method of inside out—form first, as it were—while paying attention to its status as an expression of Keats’s own uncertainty within the development of his career as well as its critical reception, I have aimed in this essay to write a chapter within the historical poetic understanding of Romantic poetry.

The questions of politics, though, is not sidelined anew by the return to form. There is the fact that, very clearly, Keats’s early reviewers did read the form of his verses, and not simply their content, as a kind of political practice. In one sense, as Cox has shown, this is simply by implication: taking up Hunt’s style of versification, Keats also seems to take up his politics. But in another, as Keach showed with the “liberal” couplets, and as I have shown here with wider elements of rhythm, the aesthetics of poetry clearly allowed Keats to think through and understand selfhood in a way that directly feeds into his politics. Croker, in his 1818 review of *Endymion* in the *Quarterly Review*, writes that “we cannot speak with any degree of certainty” about the poem’s plot (rev. of *Endymion*, p. 205); wittingly or unwittingly, Croker reveals an alertness to the poem’s uncertain paths. Its aesthetics of uncertainty implicate in it a Humean epistemology: of a thoroughgoing empirical mode that focuses on perception, sensuousness, and the passions, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. And one way in which uncertainty is raised to the level of political theory is in its resistance to any reactionary impulse. Hume,

⁵² See Yopie Prins, “What Is Historical Poetics?,” *Modern Language Quarterly*, 77 (2016), 13–40.

reflecting on the Protestant succession in his own times, develops a particular kind of political skepticism in response to that politically “uncertain” situation.⁵³ It is the responsibility of the “philosopher alone, who is of neither party,” to weigh up the merits of competing parties, but it must also be acknowledged that “political questions are infinitely complicated”; the philosopher-judge would be right, therefore, to bring only the sentiments of “hesitation, and reserve, and suspense” to the situation (Hume, “Of the Protestant Succession,” p. 507). What Hume does here is raise the act of remaining uncertain to the level of a political virtue, and that period of not knowing can in fact be a pathway to progress. Keats had something similar in mind when he advised his siblings to “let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts” and “not a select party,” and the politics of *Endymion* belong to this school of thought. This is to think of the poem as engaged in political-theoretical thought without falling into the correspondence theory of New Historicism—without reaching irritably for a fact in the world, such as “the Terror, King Ludd, Peterloo, the Six Acts, and the recurrent financial crises of the Regency” (McGann, “Keats and the Historical Method,” p. 1024), to find its likeness in the text at hand and so declare it political. This kind of noncorrespondent truth, contained in the apparent autonomy of the work of art, is what Theodor Adorno called “truth content”—the kind of truth that pertains more to structures of thought than it does to images of the world.⁵⁴ But this is also to recognize that form has a history, that Keats’s experiments in form in *Endymion* were—as his first critics well knew—directly responsive to contemporary discussions of the politics of form, and that form is therefore always, on its own terms, a politically charged phenomenon.

This is not to say that the political element in a writer’s work should be the sole goal of formalist criticism, and the thinking that Keats does through form operates on many levels.

⁵³ See David Hume, “Of the Protestant Succession” (1752), in his *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, revised ed. (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics Fund Press, 1985, 1987), p. 502.

⁵⁴ See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 1997).

To a certain extent we prioritize a work's political elements to justify the social worth of criticism, and, as early as 1998, Charles Altieri was able to write with some irony that "it seems as if literary criticism has to be able to idealize ethics now that it has manifestly failed to affect politics."⁵⁵ There is a felt need to justify the study of literary works by some external standard: to locate the political or the ethical in novels and poems, and so vindicate the role of criticism in academic literature and in the classroom. But just as aesthetics are always embroiled in politics and ethics, so too is the study and analysis of literature. Vladimir Nabokov, the author-critic who gave the world the fictional scholarly article "The Proustian theme in a letter from Keats to Benjamin Bailey,"⁵⁶ outlines in his *Lectures on Literature* (1980) a model of critical practice that begins with the particulars of texts ("fondle details").⁵⁷ He starts by offering a potential subtitle for his own lecture series: "Kindness to Authors" (Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, p. 1). Kindness, for Nabokov, because the critic should attend to the particularities of the text at hand rather than start with the "ready-made generalization" of theory, and thus should read the author on his or her own terms (*Lectures on Literature*, p. 1). But kindness, also, because the sustained effort to understand a work on the terms of an author—whether that means attention to style, form, or circumstance—is the same process by which we come to understand other people, even ones very different from ourselves. Politically and socially speaking, this way of reading and thinking is what makes empathy possible. Wherein lies happiness? *Endymion's* answer, once more: "In that which becks / Our ready minds to fellowship divine, / A fellowship with essence." Political or apolitical, historical or ahistorical, the sentiment is clear: happiness lies in the ability to understand, to a radical degree, other beings. For Keats, this is a layer of meaning realized in the aesthetics of his work; truth is beauty, after all.

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⁵⁵ Charles Altieri, "Lyrical Ethics and Literary Experience," *Style*, 32 (1998), 272.

⁵⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1955), p. 18.

⁵⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 1.

ABSTRACT

Chris Townsend, “‘The Very Music of the Name’: Uncertainty as Aesthetic Principle in Keats’s *Endymion*” (pp. 441–472)

It is well known that John Keats thought that true poets were those who are capable of being in “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts” without feeling the need to reach after solid facts. And “uncertainty” is a recurrent term in his 1818 poem *Endymion* and its preface. But what does it mean for the figure of Endymion to follow an “uncertain path,” and what role do experimental poetics play in that experience of not knowing? This essay reflects on three aspects of the rhythms of *Endymion*—the relation of line to sentence, the transformative quality of the poem’s rhymes, and the rhythmical malleability of the name “Endymion” itself—to argue that what Keats’s early critics were hostile to in his poem was precisely what he strove to produce: a poetics of uncertainty. By turning close attention to the local effects of Keats’s rhythms, and by mounting an argument about the structure of his thinking that concerns the shape of his verses, I also want to reopen a perennial question in both Formalist and New Historicist branches of Keats scholarship: whether it makes sense to think of Keats as a “political” or “ideological” poet, and of what that might mean in relation to his aesthetics.

Keywords: John Keats; rhythm; rhyme; uncertainty; poetics