“Let us not therefore go hurrying about”: Towards an Aesthetics of Passivity in Keats’s Poetics

In a letter to J.H. Reynolds of 19 February 1818, John Keats describes “the beauty of the morning operating on a sense of Idleness” and, comparing busy bees to feminine flowers, he exclaims, “let us not therefore go hurrying about…[but be] passive and receptive” (Letters 232). Presupposing a binary between “hurrying” actively and receiving passively, such a statement might seem to reinforce that Keats saw a connection between psychological openness and bodily inactivity, an assumption that locates Keats’s view of passivity easily within a Wordsworthian lexicon, right under the entry for wise passiveness. Yet attending to Keats’s own, active use of passiveness, as this paper will do, illuminates other ways of striving. For flowers call to bees without effort, through colors indiscernible to the human eye, and, for all his idleness, Keats judges his morning to be both beautiful and operational. Passivity, Keats implies, is both a choice and an attitude, which may be struck even, or especially, in writing—“I am sensible,” Keats teases, that “all this is a mere sophistication...[designed to] lift a little time from your Shoulders” (Letters 233). By inviting Reynolds, the receptive reader, to participate in an epistolary exchange activated by indolence, Keats turns from his own repose to his reader’s equally embodied response, shoulders and all. Reoriented
by the “mere sophistication” that directs Keats’s posturing self-consciously towards his addressee, the poet’s passive attitude encourages a lighthearted sociability that is at once reciprocal and, indeed, flowerlike.

This well-known letter captures the dynamic passivity that animates many of Keats’s poems, including “Ode on Indolence,” but it also employs a vocabulary so Wordsworthian (or so it seems) that scholars have consistently presumed confluences of definition between the two. Walter Jackson Bate, for instance, has noted that Keats’s sustained work on *Endymion* caused the poet to seek out “mere passivity,” a “natural reaction,” which explains why “the image of the receptive flower, visited and fertilized by the bee, caught his fancy” (Bate 250). By the end of the paragraph, the critic is ready to claim that Keats was interested in “slow development, maturity, rooted strength, leisure for growth… something close to Wordsworth’s ‘wise passiveness’” (Bate 250). This pervasive assertion—that, for Keats, poetic production benefits from, and may even depend upon, an unassertive sort of passiveness—gathers strength from the established relationship between Keats’s negative capability and Wordsworth’s wise passiveness inaugurated by H.W. Garrod and Jacod D. Wigod in 1952. Canonical Romantic criticism, From Bate to Geoffrey H. Hartman and Jack Stillinger, has reinforced this link, and the comparison remains even in recent critical reconsiderations. In fact, many scholars, Bate foremost among them, have shown that negative capability arose quite immediately out of Keats’s admiration of Shakespeare, modern theatre, the acting of Edmund Kean and William Hazlitt’s critical reviews. Yet important contributions to this revisionary conversation from Andrew Bennett, Jeffrey Cox, Jonathan Mulrooney, Nicolas Roe, and others, have either maintained or overlooked the original comparison to Wordsworth. The
unintended consequence for Keats studies has been that presumptions about a
Wordsworthian inheritance continue to overshadow Keats’s dynamic engagements with
passivity. Scholars may differ over the degree to which negative capability was
influenced by, or is similar to, wise passiveness, but they still generally agree on what
passiveness means for Wordsworth, and, by the same logic, for Keats—a diffuse or open
mind, and a stationary body.

In recovering passiveness as a dynamic attitude for Keats, I want to suggest that
Keatsian passivity suspends action in such a way as to produce the affective force of
reservation or retreat. Like the Romantic theatrical practice of striking attention-grabbing
poses, or “attitudes,” on stage, Keats treats passivity as an embodied and even physically
demanding attitude, which stages detachment in order to prompt the engagement of
others. I argue that “Ode on Indolence” figures movements into and out of such
attitudes, creating a dynamic of retreat and pursuit through which Keats activates
the relational subjectivity that drives the poem. While “Ode on Indolence” has been
taken as a work about the burden of poetic creation, in which the luxury of idleness
competes with the pressure to produce, such critiques too often read the speaker as
helplessly enervated, motivated, as Jacques Khalip asserts, by “a consciousness forever
craving to disappear into the art it imagines and wants” (50). Such utter self-negation,
psychological and physical, fails to appreciate the active negotiations between poet and
audience that the speaker’s passive encounters animate. Following Jonathan Mulrooney’s
claim that Keatsian subjectivity depends vitally on the affective pressures of other bodies
(Avatar 314), I would like to propose that passivity, for Keats, draws out and on the
affective register of perception in order to invite (and even, sometimes, to compel) an
embodied response. Keats’s love of the theatre, evinced in letters and his review of Kean, opens *Ode on Indolence* to critical engagement with the art of the theatrical attitude, and most especially to Kean’s dramatic innovations. Propelled by these contexts, Keatsian passivity reveals its aesthetic as well as its social dimensions, as the poet’s passive retreats invite his audience to read, as well as sit, on the edges of their seats.

In late 1817 and early 1818 Keats had myriad reasons for conceiving of passivity as a dynamic attitude capable of engaging such forms of relational subjectivity. Attending theatrical performances and participating in the lively aesthetic debates of Leigh Hunt, Hazlitt and other Cockney School contemporaries, Keats sought to express the aesthetic power of affect—or something very like it, “gusto” (an idea introduced to him by Hazlitt) or “intensity”—in his letters, poems and the review of Kean, which appeared in the *Champion* on 21 December 1817 *(Hampstead 230; Letters 192)*. Emphasizing the affective immediacy of the actor’s voice and presence, Keats’s review pays close attention to the ways in which Kean’s passive achievements both move audiences and reveal the actor’s responsiveness to the roles he plays *(Hampstead 230)*. Keats begins by admiring Kean’s ability to inhabit characters of both “the utmost of quiet and turbulence” but ends by choosing, from an entire “volume” of timeless examples, to commend especially Kean’s dramatic demotions, “those lines of impatience to the night who ‘like a foul and ugly witch, doth limp so tediously away’” *(Hampstead 229)*. Such an assessment differentiates Kean from his forebears and contemporaries; for, even though the dramatic attitude—or the “strategic use of sustained pause,” as Judith Pascoe describes it (77)—was already an established part of the repertoires of Sarah Siddons and other Kemble School actors, Kean radically refashioned the practice. Rather than holding static postures...
for an extended period, Kean’s pauses, advances, and retreats created an effect, according to Coleridge, very like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightening (“Table Talk” 265). As Tracy Davis makes clear, Coleridge’s remark is far from complimentary, as it alludes to the swagger and unevenness of Kean’s style (940). Keats’s review of Kean, by refusing to censure the bathos (as Coleridge describes it) of Kean’s abrupt shifts and descending actions, indicates the poet’s interest in the affective power of such retreats—Kean’s laudable ability to do “‘his spiriting gently’” (Hampstead 229). Most critically, Keats describes how Kean attracts an audience, like “moths about a candle,” by opening himself to the felt immediacy of each moment on stage, “deliver[ing] himself up to the instant feeling, without the shadow of a thought about any thing else” (Hampstead 229, 230). For Keats, Kean’s passive attitudes become part of a reciprocal relation between actor and audience, mediated by the play’s language, in which Kean gives himself over to these influences and his audience, in turn, finds him utterly compelling.

“Ode on Indolence” is a poem in pursuit of itself, which is to say it is a poem about indolence, in which indolence measures the desirability of poetic composition. Keatsian passivity here becomes a means to express the speaker’s changing relationship to poetic perception—figured by the muses Love, Ambition and Poesy—from his initial state of unsuspecting indolence, to his pursuit of the muses’ passive retreats, to the dramatically passive attitude by which the speaker finally claims to throw off the muses’ influence. This dynamic exchange between pursuit and retreat drives the ode’s narrative and, more critically, casts poetic perception as an affect—as the immediate and embodied response of poet to muse. If indolence leaves the speaker’s senses “Benumb’d” and “Unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness,” then the muses’ presence makes him “burn”
and “ache for wings” [lines 17, 20, 23, 24]) When they appear to be retreating from him, the speaker “want[s] wings” to follow, even though, only a few lines later, he admits that his “demon Poesy” has “no joy for him” (lines 31, 30, 35). Indolence, in this way, leads to poetic production, wanted or unwanted, but only because it opens poets to passions that influence and even compel them unawares.

Passivity’s subtly compelling force in “Ode on Indolence” emerges most clearly in the speaker’s perceptions of the urn. In the ode’s opening stanza, the speaker perceives the muses, as if frozen on a vase, in attitudes as stolid as those of Kemble School actors. The speaker describes these figures advancing and retreating, coming into and out of view:

They pass’d, like figures on a marble urn,

When shifted round to see the other side;

They came again; as when the urn once more

Is shifted round, the first seen shades return;

And they were strange to me…

How is it, Shadows! That I knew ye not? (lines 1-11)

Whereas “Ode on a Grecian Urn”’s “attic shape! Fair attitude!” that is “for ever panting” gasps with passionate potential (lines 41, 27), “Ode on Indolence”’s passive attitudes wear “placid sandals” and move “serene[ly]” (lines 3, 4). The speaker, caught in a “blissful cloud of summer indolence,” may merely gaze at the puzzling urn, or may hold it aloft and turn it; Keats’s passive constructions (“When shifted round,” “Is shifted round”) conceal the source of the urn’s revolutions, and emphasize instead the dreamy
quality of both speaker and muses (lines 16, 6, 8). Yet as the figures revolve into view a second time, they are even less present: “faded,” as the speaker says later on, or else more shadowy or shade-like (lines 23, 11). From a *tableau vivant* the figures on the urn become a moving (fading) picture, before which Keats’s speaker is both captivated audience and keen pursuer. Fading and revolving collapse into the speaker’s singular experience of the muses’ retreat, and he “burn[s]” to follow (line 23). This is more than a depiction of indolence as receptivity to inspiration: it is the deployment of passivity itself as a force of affective engagement.

Keats’s speaker is not completely oblivious, however. His recognition of the figures in the third stanza produces a sense of guardedness and restraint that, although not quite enough to extricate him from the vortex of the muses’ attractions, subtly shifts the terms of their relationship. The muses are, for the speaker, a paradox of desire and refutation, as he admonishes them for “steal[ing] away, and leav[ing] without a task [His] idle days,” on the one hand, and asks, “O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense

When quoting lines of poetry in-text, separate the lines with a slash.

‘Unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness?’” on the other (lines 14-15, 19-20). The senses by which the speaker perceives these goading affections are similarly paradoxical. The ode opens with a sighting— “One morn before me were three figures seen”—that does not provide the speaker sufficient information to identify the muses, and it closes with a command for the figures to “fade softly from mine eyes,” and “Vanish” (lines 1, 55, 60). Yet the speaker’s affections compel him as “a fever fit” even after he recognizes the figure for what they are (line 34). The felt immediacy of the muses’ influence—those aches and wants (line 24, 31)—do not shift in tandem with the speaker’s visual cues, but seem, rather, to layer on top of one another, suspending the
revelation of the muses’ identities and obscuring their purpose. A “visual touch,” as Brian Massumi conceives it, affirms the fundamentally synesthetic nature of affect, and highlights the particularly close interpolation of touch and vision in Gilles Deleuze’s theory of the haptic. “What,” Massumi asks, “besides sight can feel texture at a glance?” (158). The answer, for Keats’s speaker, is the dream or memory of a haptic experience, a persistent and embodied re-encounter that blurs distinctions between modes of perception. By giving way to the muses as in a “dim dream,” the speaker finally locates himself in relation to them and, at the same time, accepts the visions they have to offer (line 42).

The theatrical contexts that permeate discussions of passivity in Keats’s letters and the poem suggest new approaches to the familiar tension between indolence and poetic production. In a letter written on 23 January 1818 and addressed to Keats’s brothers, the poet frames the composition of the *King Lear* sonnet (a poem occasioned by a play) as an act of dramatic and discursive intensity prompted by passivity. The letter describes Keats’s changing mindset, which moves from a passive “addiction,” to interest and employment, and finally to a sense of motivation so insistent that it appears located elsewhere—in the “demand” of Shakespeare’s play for a prefatory poem:

I think a little change has taken place in my intellect lately—I cannot bear to be uninterested or unemployed, I, who for so long a time, have been addicted to passiveness—Nothing is finer for the purposes of great productions, than a very gradual ripening of the intellectual powers. As an instance of this—observe—I sat down yesterday to read King Lear once again and the thing appeared to demand the prologue of a Sonnet, I wrote it (*Letters* 214)
Like the slow cementing of friendships, Keats’s chronic passivity opens him to the attractions of poetry by the “very gradual ripening of the intellectual powers” (1:214). Here again, passivity allows the poet to gauge whether, despite knowing the play well, its inspirational effect is enough to compel him to write. Yet neither of these outcomes leads directly to the play’s demand. Rather, Keats’s first passive addiction frames another retreat—momentarily suspended by the command to watch it—into a pose of readerly receptivity. Sitting down, Keats embodies an attitude attuned to inspiration and, at the same time, positions himself in relation to his reader-as-audience. Keats’s deployments of passivity as a dynamic attitude, here and in the other letters and the ode, challenges the assumption in much recent scholarship that passiveness, for Keats, was an essentially disembodied and unassertive state, a conclusion that has hinged upon the established relationship between negative capability and wise passiveness. Keats’s review of Kean suggests ways in which dynamic passiveness gained an aesthetic dimension for the poet, and drawing attention to the affective intensity of such movements, “Ode on Indolence” reveals that, for Keats, a passive retreat could not only be a receptive state, but a powerfully persuasive mechanism for inviting response.


**MLA Layout, Works Cited page:**

1. Center the words “Works Cited” **do not** make them bold or underline them!
2. Use a hanging indentation of 1 inch
3. Put your entries in ALPHABETICAL ORDER!

**Creating a Works Cited list using the MLA eighth edition**

This information below is taken directly from the Owl @ Purdue Website. If you are looking for more info, please visit them!

MLA has turned to a style of documentation that is based on a general method that may be applied to every possible source, to many different types of writing. But since texts have become increasingly mobile, and the same document may be found in several different sources, following a set of fixed rules is no longer sufficient.

The current system is based on a few principles, rather than an extensive list of specific rules. While the handbook still gives examples of how to cite sources, it is organized according to the process of documentation, rather than by the sources themselves. This process teaches writers a flexible method that is universally applicable. Once you are familiar with the method, you can use it to document any type of source, for any type of paper, in any field.

Here is an overview of the process:

When deciding how to cite your source, start by consulting the list of core elements. These are the general pieces of information that MLA suggests including in each Works Cited entry. In your citation, the elements should be listed in the following order:

1. Author.
2. Title of source.
3. Title of container,
4. Other contributors,
5. Version,
6. Number,
7. Publisher,
8. Publication date,
9. Location.

Each element should be followed by the punctuation mark shown here. Earlier editions of the handbook included the place of publication, and required punctuation such as journal editions in parentheses, and colons after issue numbers. In the current version, punctuation is simpler (just commas and periods separate the elements), and information about the source is kept to the basics.

**Author**

Begin the entry with the author's last name, followed by a comma and the rest of the name, as presented in the work. End this element with a period.


**Title of source**

The title of the source should follow the author's name. Depending upon the type of source, it should be listed in italics or quotation marks.

A book should be in italics:


A website should be in italics:


A periodical (journal, magazine, newspaper article) should be in quotation marks:


A song or piece of music on an album should be in quotation marks:


*The eighth edition handbook recommends including URLs when citing online sources. For more information, see the “Optional Elements” section below.*
**Title of container**

Unlike earlier versions, the eighth edition refers to containers, which are the larger wholes in which the source is located. For example, if you want to cite a poem that is listed in a collection of poems, the individual poem is the source, while the larger collection is the container. The title of the container is usually italicized and followed by a comma, since the information that follows next describes the container.


The container may also be a television series, which is made up of episodes.


The container may also be a website, which contains articles, postings, and other works.


In some cases, a container might be within a larger container. You might have read a book of short stories on *Google Books*, or watched a television series on *Netflix*. You might have found the electronic version of a journal on JSTOR. It is important to cite these containers within containers so that your readers can find the exact source that you used.


**Other contributors**

In addition to the author, there may be other contributors to the source who should be credited, such as editors, illustrators, translators, etc. If their contributions are relevant to your research, or necessary to identify the source, include their names in your documentation.

*Note:* In the eighth edition, terms like editor, illustrator, translator, etc., are no longer abbreviated.
Version

If a source is listed as an edition or version of a work, include it in your citation.


Number

If a source is part of a numbered sequence, such as a multi-volume book, or journal with both volume and issue numbers, those numbers must be listed in your citation.


"94 Meetings." Parks and Recreation, created by Greg Daniels and Michael Schur, performance by Amy Poehler, season 2, episode 21, Deedle-Dee Productions and Universal Media Studios, 2010.


Publisher

The publisher produces or distributes the source to the public. If there is more than one publisher, and they are all are relevant to your research, list them in your citation, separated by a forward slash (/).


Note: the publisher’s name need not be included in the following sources: periodicals, works published by their author or editor, a Web cite whose title is the same name as its publisher, a Web cite that makes works available but does not actually publish them (such as YouTube, WordPress, or JSTOR).

Publication date

The same source may have been published on more than one date, such as an online version of an original source. For example, a television series might have aired on a broadcast network on one date, but released on Netflix on a different date. When the source has more than one date, it is sufficient to use the date that is most relevant to your use of it. If you’re unsure about which date to use, go with the date of the source’s original publication.

In the following example, Mutant Enemy is the primary production company, and “Hush” was released in 1999. This is the way to create a general citation for a television episode.


However, if you are discussing, for example, the historical context in which the episode originally aired, you should cite the full date. Because you are specifying the date of airing, you would then use WB Television Network (rather than Mutant Enemy), because it was the network (rather than the production company) that aired the episode on the date you’re citing.


Location

You should be as specific as possible in identifying a work’s location.

An essay in a book, or an article in journal should include page numbers.


The location of an online work should include a URL.

A physical object that you experienced firsthand should identify the place of location.


**Optional elements**

The eighth edition is designed to be as streamlined as possible. The author should include any information that helps readers easily identify the source, without including unnecessary information that may be distracting. The following is a list of select optional elements that should be part of a documented source at the writer's discretion.

**Date of original publication:**

If a source has been published on more than one date, the writer may want to include both dates if it will provide the reader with necessary or helpful information.


**City of publication:**

The seventh edition handbook required the city in which a publisher is located, but the eighth edition states that this is only necessary in particular instances, such as in a work published before 1900. Since pre-1900 works were usually associated with the city in which they were published, your documentation may substitute the city name for the publisher's name.


**Date of access:**

When you cite an online source, the *MLA Handbook* recommends including a date of access on which you accessed the material, since an online work may change or move at any time.


**URLs:**
As mentioned above, while the eighth edition recommends including URLs when you cite online sources, you should always check with your instructor or editor and include URLs at their discretion.

**DOIs:**

A DOI, or digital object identifier, is a series of digits and letters that leads to the location of an online source. Articles in journals are often assigned DOIs to ensure that the source is locatable, even if the URL changes. If your source is listed with a DOI, use that instead of a URL.


**Creating in-text citations using the eighth edition**

The in-text citation is a brief reference within your text that indicates the source you consulted. It should properly attribute any ideas, paraphrases, or direct quotations to your source, and should direct readers to the entry in the list of works cited. For the most part, an in-text citation is the **author’s name and page number (or just the page number, if the author is named in the sentence) in parentheses:**

Imperialism is “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory” (*Said* 9).

or

According to **Edward W. Said**, imperialism is defined by “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory” (9).

**Work Cited**


When creating in-text citations for media that has a runtime, such as a movie or podcast, include the range of hours, minutes and seconds you plan to reference, like so (00:02:15-00:02:35).

Again, your goal is to attribute your source and provide your reader with a reference without interrupting your text. Your readers should be able to follow the flow of your argument without becoming distracted by extra information.

**FINAL REMARKS:**
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If you are already familiar with traditional MLA citation methods, continue to use them in a more simplified form. Since the eighth edition emphasizes the writer’s freedom to create references based on the expectations of the audience, consider what your readers need to know if they want to find your source.

• Think of MLA style principles as flexible guides, rather than rules. Part of your responsibility as a writer is to evaluate your readers and decide what your particular audience needs to know about your sources.

• Your goal is to inform, persuade, and otherwise connect with your audience; error-free writing, along with trustworthy documentation, allows readers to focus on your ideas.

• In-text citations should look consistent throughout your paper. The principles behind in-text citations have changed very little from the seventh to the eighth editions.

• List of works cited/works consulted needs to include basic core information, such as author’s name, title of source, publication date, and other information, depending on the type of source. Each entry should be uniform and simple, but should give enough information so that your readers can locate your sources.

• These updated MLA guidelines are based on a simple theory: once you know the basic principles of style and citation, you can apply that knowledge widely, and generate useful documentation for any type of publication, in any field.