The Poetics
of Uncontrollability
in Keats's
Endymion

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Language Theory and Romantic Periodicals

By

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To Giuseppe Nuara, Rosaria Palazzolo,
Marianna Bommarito and Salvatore Anselmo.
My grandparents.

"The only impeccable writers are those that never wrote."
—William Hazlitt

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

In the past thirty years Keatsian studies have been given a new lease of life thanks to the contribution of new historicism. This scholarly approach has left traditional criticism behind in order to recover the socio-political and linguistic contexts underlying the poet's literary production. This has caused the consistent recurrence of three different, but interrelated critical concerns: the contemporary reception of Keats's work, early nineteenth-century language theory, and the political implications of both. Scholars have re-read the notorious negative reviews of *Endymion* (1818) in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review*, and have brought to light, with unprecedented detail and thoroughness, the reviewers' socio-political and cultural motives. Scholarly interest in the relationship between Romantic writers and the linguistic theories of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has showed that language was increasingly associated with status, education, and nationalist ideals, and that the so-called Cockney poets proposed a literary idiom which violated several accepted tenets of politeness, poetic decorum, and correctness. New historicist works have also shown that Keats, canonically viewed as an ethereal aesthete, was, in fact, very politically conscious and that his works, some sonnets in *Poems* (1817), *Endymion* and *To Autumn* in particular, were perceived by some of his contemporaries as ostensibly radical and seditious.

The present work is built upon the more fortunate and insightful suggestions inherent in the new historicist approach to Keats's poetry, and wishes to benefit from its erudite contribution, while avoiding its more extremist pronouncements. Even though a reconsideration of *context* will be my biggest concern in this study, I will consciously disregard political considerations, for I believe they colour Keats's poetry with a critical tint too bright and unnatural, and they deprive it of its natural hues, its peculiar light and shades. My concern is with the negative reception of Keats's *Endymion*, with the use of language in the poem, and with the intricate web of cause-effect relations between critical reception and language. The novelty in my approach lies in the conscious appraisal that party politics were integral to all manifestations of British culture at the time and can thus be viewed as an unmarked background. When politics subside, it is possible to recover language and language theories, to reconstruct the

peculiar linguistic signature of Keats's work, to which some critics so strongly reacted. It is important that I here draw a further distinction: my linguistic concern differs from the new historicist matrix, chiefly in that new historicist work has addressed language issues in the early nineteenth-centuries as if they could be directly mapped onto political beliefs. I maintain that they should not.

Endymion is the *trâit d'union* between Keats's *juvenilia* (*Poems*, 1817) and his better known, and conventionally more mature works (*Lamia, Isabella ... and other Poems*, 1820). By its nature, it is a transitional work, and thus gives the scholar special insight into the development of Keats's poetics and idiom. Moreover, *Endymion* is the Keatsian work which most rattled and provoked contemporary critics; the two pieces of venomous invective it received in the periodical press of the time have become the stuff of scholarly legend.

The present work reconstructs the linguistic context of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries in order to explain the reviewers' unease with regard to *Endymion*. I will maintain that eighteenth-century prescriptivism arose from a deep-seated anxiety of language, Lockean in origin, and that the ensuing desire to stabilize and therefore control language informed Romantic criticism in general, and the criticism of Keats's work in particular, more fundamentally than politics could or did. I will therefore analyse the imaginative and linguistic markers of *Endymion* in order to prove that Keats produced a "poetics of uncontrollability", a series of textual and stylistic strategies, which violated linguistic and narrative standards and were therefore perceived as unsettling.

The first part of my research retraces the history of linguistic thought in the eighteenth century: the starting point is Locke's provocative analysis of language in the third book of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Locke elaborates a pre-Saussurean notion of arbitrariness which foregrounds the irreconcilable distance between words and things, and the tenuous conventional connection between words and thoughts; moreover, Locke insists on the semantic instability inherent in every linguistic system. In the light of such analysis, language appears unhinged, and consequently too unstable, incapable of a faithful representation of thought and reality, as well as potentially manipulative, unfit for the transmission of knowledge and truth. Locke's theory cuts to the quick of language and is one of the driving forces behind the prescriptivist urge at the core of eighteenth-century language studies. The eighteenth century is thus characterized by a dialectics between language and control, evident in the production of normative grammars, in the

search for a linguistic standard, and in the deeply felt desire to build a linguistic identity for Great Britain.

The second part of the research consists of two chapters and shows how the linguistic and grammatical background established in the eighteenth century influenced the literary criticism in the periodical press during the Romantic period. The dialectics between language and control is incarnated in the relationship between Romantic critics and writers. The critics perceive themselves as protectors of the linguistic and literary integrity of the nation, while the writers, no longer responsible for establishing the linguistic standard, enjoy a greater degree of linguistic freedom. Such freedom is often chastised and checked by the strong, deeply conscious intervention of the reviewers. The second chapter of my research recovers the historical and cultural context of periodical criticism in the first twenty years of the nineteenth century. The third chapter deals with the more specific issue of Keatsian criticism and sheds new light on the contemporary reception of the poet's works, which, under closer scrutiny, proves to have been preponderantly favourable. The two negative reviews of *Endymion* undergo a depoliticized reading in order to emphasize their considerable linguistic import.

The last part of my research is concerned with "the poetics of uncontrollability". *Endymion* is a highly controversial poem within the Keatsian production: as the poet's first ambitious project, it contains the sum of its author's poetic and stylistic concerns and is a creative 'cauldron' in which the limits of narrative structure, metrics and the English language are put to the test in the relentless search for poetic identity and a peculiar poetic signature. *Endymion* is strongly uncontrolled and is perceived by contemporaries as a violation of conventions on multiple levels. I analyse Keats's poem in all its supposed fallacies. The fourth chapter deals specifically with the lack of organic unity and the perceived absence of a consistent plan for narrative development. The fifth and last chapter deals with the more specific linguistic issues: the violation of metrical rules as the heroic couplet is used and misused with almost unprecedented liberty; the inconsistency and flimsiness of the rhymes; the syntactical complexity of the poem realized through the regular use of enjambment, *accumulatio* and inversion; and, finally, the lexical creativity, which through the processes of derivation and compounding, is an astounding example of verbal creativity, not to mention a considerable violation of accepted eighteenth- and nineteenth-century linguistic tenets.

Through the revisitation of several canonical scholarly concerns, the present work presents known elements under a new light and gives new impetus to less politicized, but no less historically conscious, research.

Philosophy of language, periodical criticism, and the relentless search for a characterising poetics on the part of Keats combine to produce a richer, deeper understanding of *Endymion*, and prompt a reconsideration of its pivotal position in Keatsian development.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ANXIETY OF LANGUAGE

Like a mist before people's eyes[1]

The relationship between Romantic literature and linguistic theory has been the focus of scholarly attention for some time[2]. This is easily explained:

> "Writers of the Romantic period were the first in the history of English literature to confront a literary field thoroughly transformed by English's purification and all its social and ideological repercussions" (Elfenbein 2009, 35).

Romantic authors operated in a cultural-linguistic context profoundly implicated with and transformed by both the legacy of eighteenth-century philosophical debate on the nature of language and the mandates of prescriptivism (including writings on grammar and language standardization). The remarkable impact that this unprecedented awareness of language issues had on Romantic writing practices is traceable in the literary work of the time, as well as in private correspondence.

Critical research in this field is erudite: it has uncovered the socio-political implications of language theory in the literary world of the early nineteenth century and has demonstrated that "our conception of Romanticism is necessarily flawed without taking proper account of the relationship" (Turley 2002, xvi) between Romantic authors and philology. However, a critical tendency to dwell on the socio-political and ideological values of *pure English* (Elfenbein 2009) to the detriment of the more strictly linguistic aspects has emerged.

Granted: linguistic practices are intimately connected with power, ideology, and the perpetration of the status quo, and the standardization of

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[1] John Locke. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, edit by Roger Woolhouse.* London: Penguin Books, 1997, 439.
[2] See, among others: Elfenbein 2009, 35; Turley 2002, xvi.

English was, for the most part, an ideological process resulting in the establishment of prerequisites for social inclusion and exclusion. Yet, it would be simplistic to read the eighteenth-century preoccupation with language as mere subscription to ideology and the necessity for discrimination of social strata.

Andrew Elfenbein has pointed out that philology is, in fact, autonomous: "the vocabulary, syntax, morphology, and pronunciation of English have histories of their own, quite apart from the social uses to which they have been put" (Elfenbein 2009, 4); and Jane Hodson has successfully argued that "the linguistic theories of the late eighteenth century cannot be mapped directly onto political beliefs" (Hodson 2007, 7). Besides, it has long been recognized that the eighteenth-century anxiety about language ran deeper than ideological and socio-political superstructures, as it involved questions of wider significance, such as Hans Aarsleff has listed:

> "What, for instance, was the origin of thought? Did the mind have a material basis? Did mankind have a single origin? Was the first language given by revelation or had man invented it in the process of time? Could etymology be made instructive without lending support to criticism" (Arsleff 1967, 4).

Language constituted itself as a controversial object of thought, raising questions that reached beyond social and cultural hegemony, questions epistemological and ontological in nature. It appeared to be a constitutive thread in the fabric of thought and reality: its origins mysterious, its inner workings unmapped, language threatened to eclipse the materiality of objects by its own materiality, it threatened the integrity of thought by its semantic instability that continuously gave way to confusion, opacity, and indeterminacy. The eighteenth century was thus fraught with linguistic debate: the origin and structure of language, its relationship to thought formation and learning processes were investigated by thinkers as diverse as political economist Adam Smith, materialist philosopher Condillac, notorious dissenter Joseph Priestley, and radical parliamentarian John Horne Tooke[3] as well as by an array of grammarians and rhetoricians who sought to regularize, document, and codify correct language use.

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[3] Adam Smith wrote the influential *Considerations Concerning the First Foundations of Languages*, 1761; Priestley wrote *A Course of Lectures on the Theory of Language and Universal Grammar*, 1762; Condillac wrote an *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines*, 1746; Tooke wrote *ΕΠΕΑ ΠΤΕΡΟΕΝΤΑ or the Diversions of Purley*, 1786.

    Philosophical enquiry led to the foregrounding of language as the basis
for rational thought, and elicited reflections both on the origin of speech
and discourse and on the possibility of universal grammar. John Locke's
theory of language was taken up by Condillac, Berkley, and Hume with
varying results, and constituted a basis for a theory of discourse hinging on
conventionalism, linguistic individualism, and the importance of custom;
but this approach was complemented by the resilience of the hypothesis of
the Adamic origin of language, which was "held during a great part of the
eighteenth century, and is explicitly stated as late as 1824 in Thomas
Martin's *Philological Grammar of the English Tongue*" (See Leonard
1929, 19).

    Grammatical studies used language philosophy as a theoretical foundation,
but ultimately grew and flourished independently, casting epistemological
concerns aside in order to embrace the more practical goals of
standardization and correctness of usage: in the first half of the eighteenth
century the grammatical concern was mostly lexical, characterized by a
taxonomic approach to the study of English; the second half of the century
saw the grammarians' interest shift towards syntax and a more functional
approach. The study of language was thus Janus-faced: on the one hand, it
was eminently philosophical and epistemological; on the other hand, it
was grammatical; it was a field of inquiry which could shed light on the
inner workings of the human mind and its learning processes, while at the
same time clarifying the dynamics of human interaction and exposing and
supporting the tight bonds between culture, national identity, and language.

    The complexity of eighteenth-century language theories, as sketched
above, imposes the choice of a point of view, to which the varied
approaches and diversity of scholarly work in the field testify[4]. In retracing
the steps of prescriptivism and advancing the claim that its theoretical
foundations lie in John Locke's theory of language (*Essay Concerning
Human Understanding*, 1690), I follow in the footsteps of traditional
language historians; but by foregrounding the anxiety of language in
Locke's pronouncements, I deliberately choose to stress the *negative
capability* of discourse, its volatility and slipperiness, instead of its *positive*,
purpose-driven characteristics. This theoretical stance is functional to my
argument and will be documented in the following pages, where I attempt
to bring one of the undercurrents of eighteenth-century linguistic thought
to the surface. By its nature, such a process must necessarily leave other
equally important threads of enquiry in the background. While I

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[4] See, among others: Raymond Hickey 2010; Leonard 1929, Del Lungo Camiciotti
1990.

acknowledge that the eighteenth century is, in fact, rife with confidence that language can be improved, stabilized and used correctly; while I grant that prescriptivism is characterized by creative streaks, in that it largely contributed to give shape to English as we now know and recognize it, I hereafter follow English in its more destabilizing and disconcerting incarnations and dwell on the dangers and uncertainties of language instead of its stability and creativity.

This chapter is built upon three key concepts: language, control, and arbitrariness. The main argument is that attempts at linguistic prescriptivism in eighteenth-century England can be ascribed to the several levels of arbitrariness inherent in the pre-Saussurean notion of the linguistic sign, that is, in the awareness that language's grip on reality is precarious, slippery, ever-changing. The purported instability of language as an instrument of categorization and expression was powerfully formulated by Locke: his provocative theory of language penetrated into the fabric of culture and thought, and was responsible for engendering the urge to impose rules, limitations, and controlling measures on language, so as to stabilize it, freeze it into submission. The arbitrariness that binds reality, language, and thought, and the powerful dynamics existing between language and control are the starting point of the present work, in as much as they were part of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century debate on language, for, indeed, philosophers, grammarians, and lexicographers all contributed to observe and describe language.

The early nineteenth century inherited the results of and the issues inherent in such reflections: in its journalistic and literary incarnations, language was perceived as a redoubtable instrument, while correct usage was the *casus belli* for many a literary controversy, as well as the crux of continued philosophical reflection. By partly disentangling language from its sociological, political, and ideological superstructures and contextualizing it into a wider philosophical, epistemological and linguistic framework, I aim to establish that the prescriptivist anxiety pulsing through the eighteenth-century, and the worship of pure English omnipresent in the early-nineteenth century cultural debate, had more to do with man being in the world, than with the safeguard of gentility or the status quo. Language did not merely threaten the élite. It threatened to unravel the very texture of reality.

The dialectic between language and control

On 2 December 1970, Michel Foucault delivered his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France; his topic was *The Order of Discourse*. In the

lecture, he turned his attention to the rules governing and, consequently, limiting the production of discourse[5].

Foucault writes:

> "In every society, the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality" (Foucault 1981, 52).

The lecture continues with a description of the procedures thanks to which discourse, in its pronounced or written form, is restrained. I choose to follow Foucault's reasoning as a linguist would: where Foucault writes *discourse*, I read its synecdochic relative, *language*[6]. The production of discourse, hence the production of language, are controlled and organized in an attempt to master their unpredictable manifestation/insurgence as well as their materiality (phonetic, graphic, aural). At this point, my interest lies in the reasons for restraint that Foucault suggests.

Language is a social fact, born and produced in a social setting; it is, therefore, subjected to processes of (re-)elaboration which orient its use in that same social setting. Far from being a Wordsworthian spontaneous overflow, language undergoes rationalization and ordering which far surpass both its inner rationale and grammatical patterning. These processes, as well as their linguistic products, are what Foucault calls discourse, whose linguistic manifestation undergoes processes of selection (separation of acceptable verbal output from a vast region of unspoken and unspeakable), organization (categorization of forms and contents),

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[5] In Foucauldian philosophy, *discourse* is not merely a linguistic concept. It can be defined as "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing – the knowledge about a particular topic at a particular historical moment. …Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But … since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect" (Hall 1992, 291). Yet, in the *Order of Discourse*, Foucault is specific about the use he makes of the word *discourse* and the attention he devotes to its "material reality as a thing pronounced or written" (Foucault 1981, 52). It is the latter sense which constitutes the basis for the argument above.

[6] The idea that the two terms – discourse and language – are not identical, but do, in fact, *implicate* each other (cf. Natoli 2005) to the point where boundaries might become blurry is further corroborated by a 2010 Routledge translation of Foucault's *Order of Discourse* lecture as *The Order of Language* (cf. Burke 2000).

redistribution (spreading of already categorized forms and contents), and control.

The idea that discourse should be subjected to legislative practices, leads to a commonplace of current Western thought, the inextricable connection between language and power: in this scenario, language is the instrument of power, redoubtable as it may, yet only a means to an end.

However, Foucault interestingly turns the tables.

He seems to suggest that power is contained in discourse, in its materiality as language, that it is a part of its genetic make-up. Language is no mere instrument or appendage; it appears to be "the thing for which and by which there is struggle… the power which is to be seized" (Foucault 1981, 53).

Considering once more the quote with which this section starts, as a reader, one is led to focus on two expressions – *chance events* and *materiality*. Both are related to what Foucault refers to as attempts to avert "the unpredictability of the appearance" of discourses (Foucault 1981, 61). Discursive practices refuse to be fixed, they are reorganized and redefined in time and space. The same happens with language proper: meaning being inherently changeable, it renders semantic stability unattainable, hence the possibility of potentially endless redetermination. Meaning changes according to context, communicative intentions and historical factors; this implies the perennial mutability of language (as well as the master discourses that structure and guide its production). In addition, the changeability inherent in language concurs to engender linguistic creativity: speakers can utter what has never been uttered before, they can state the unsaid, push language in new, unpredictable directions or, in Foucault's words, occasion *chance events*, become instances of *resistance*. *Formidable materiality*, on the other hand, can be understood as the tangible, sensible aspect of language, "the untamed, imperious being of words" (Foucault 2002, 327); their undeniable physicality which appeals to the senses for the decryption of meaning.

While reading the wor(l)d through ontologically different eyes, early-modern philosophers of language showed remarkable concern for *chance events*, that is, the unpredictability of language, and were haunted by the potentially destructive powers inherent in the fundamental *materiality* of linguistic signs. In the late seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, philosophers generally accepted that "words function by being sensible marks of insensible ideas" (Dawson 2007, 155). Words make private thoughts visible, audible. This implies that "it is the sensible, rather than

the semantic element of words that has actual priority in the communication situation, even though it is logically subordinate" (Dawson 2007, ibid.). The formidable, inescapable materiality of words is constantly under the communicative spotlight and inevitably steals the show; threatening to shade or, even, eclipse meaning. Little by little, meanings and the real-life objects lurking behind them, fade in the background, hidden behind sound. Descartes explains this process and its consequences in the following manner:

> "Because of the use of language, we tie all our concepts to the words used to express them; and when we store concepts in our memory we always simultaneously store the corresponding words. Later on we find the words easier to recall than the things; and because of this it is very seldom that our concept of a thing is so distinct that we can separate it totally from our concept of the words involved. The thoughts of almost all people are more concerned with words than with things [...]" (Descartes 1985, 220-1).

Reality and its verbal representation are two very different things and can tell very different stories, the materiality of language makes sure of that. The speaker is instinctively led to superimpose language on the world: thus words become the things they supposedly represent. The speaker substitutes the physical reality of things and events with language, which stops being a representational tool and obscures reality itself, impeaching clear thought. Locke, in his attempt to unveil the difference between substantial knowledge and hollow verbiage, asked: "How many are there that when they want to think on things, fix their thoughts only on words" (Locke 1997, 453).

In 1970, Foucault was framing a substantially different issue, but his focus on discourse in its material manifestation (verbal, written, linguistic) and his stress on materiality and chance events/unpredictability are reminiscent of a concern that was lurking underneath the surface of most eighteenth-century reflections on language, albeit in a different philosophical/epistemological context.

Early-modern philosophers were particularly provoked by the nature of language: they believed its materiality and multideterminability questioned its ability to be a faithful representation of reality, a reliable and effective means for the transmission of truth and logical reasoning. Knowledge, it was thought, could neither be properly obtained nor retained if language, the instrument for its transmission, was defective; and while some thinkers claimed that language use, when defective, could be corrected, others, most notably Locke, claimed that language was defective *per se*: it was *inherently* indeterminate, material and misleading; being irremediably rent

from the fabric of reality, it was a system of signs relying on the vagaries of custom for correct and efficacious functioning. Because of these characteristics, "language came to seem dangerously unhinged" (Dawson 2007, 1).

Foucault's observations on the disciplining of language thus appear particularly relevant to the context of early-modern linguistic anxiety, which was one of the triggers for the eighteenth-century standardization of English, "a complex and unceasing process of permission and denial" (Crowley 2003, 2).

What's in a word? The Polysemy of the Arbitrary

The second pillar of eighteen-century language reflection on which this chapter rests is arbitrariness. Several late seventeenth-century philosophical linguistic theories recognized conventionality as the founding characteristic of language. The adjective *arbitrary* thus entered usage as the definitive qualifier for characterizing linguistic signs.

It is imperative that I here dispel all temptation in the reader to think of the linguistic sign or of the notion of arbitrariness in Saussurean terms[7]. The terms should be, if anything, Lockean, for all linguistic considerations in Locke's time were part of a wider context, and usually stemmed from epistemological preoccupations. In fact, language study was only one facet of a larger network of human science studies.

The notion of arbitrariness, itself, and, consequently, the use of the adjective *arbitrary*, require clarification. Firstly, the polysemic nature of the word arbitrariness breeds contradiction and ambiguity; secondly, there are several levels of arbitrariness stemming from Locke's analysis of the complex relations within the epistemological triangle of word, thought, and object; each level relying on a slightly different acceptation of the

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[7] "Saussure describes the linguistic sign as 'a double entity, one formed by the association of two terms'. These two terms do not consist of a name and a thing, but of a form which signifies – the signifier – and a meaning – the signified. The signifier is the perceptible, material, acoustic or visual signal that triggers a mental image – the signified. Hence the signified of *cat* is not the animal itself, but a mental representation of a feline creature – the image we construct mentally when we hear the word or see it written. The signifier and signified being linked by an associative bond *in the mind*, the resulting linguistic sign is described as a 'two-sided psychological entity'" (Ribière 2008, 23). In early-modern thought, on the other hand, a *sign* is that which it is in its proper semantic nature to be: a means of deferral, something that points to something else. To Locke, signifier and signified would be exactly what they are not for Saussure: a name and a thing.

notion of arbitrariness. My task here is to attempt ordering of the contradictions and ambiguity.

In 2004, William Keach was the first to present the scholarly world with a systematic picture of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourse of the arbitrary. His aim was to raise questions about the relationship between Romanticism and language. Keach's interest lay in the duplicitous nature of the *arbitrary*, which became a key term in eighteenth-century political and linguistic discourses. On the one hand, *arbitrary* was usually collocated in the noun phrase "arbitrary power", which was the "concept through which republican or liberal or even Whig political discourse [named] monarchical, and in some cases patriarchal, tyranny and despotism" (Keach 2004, 1); on the other hand, it was used in relation to language studies as the prevailing term expressing the conventional nature of language.

Keach's work makes relevant claims: it contends that the discourse of the arbitrary is paramount in understanding the Romantic engagement with language and politics, while also showing that the scholarly perception of the arbitrary has long been stunted by many critics' reluctance, even failure, to see the gaps in Saussure's notion of arbitrariness, more than that, the potential short-sightedness in it. In fact, Saussure seemed to emphasise the signified and signifier to the detriment of *realia* to which both signifier and signified refer. Keach quotes Raymond Williams's *Marxism and Literature* (1977) in order to bring *realia*, the material world in which language plays the ordering principle, but of which it is no mirror, into the foreground:

> "The relation within the sign between the formal element and the meaning which this element carries…is inevitably conventional (thus far agreeing with orthodox semiotic theory), but it is not arbitrary and, crucially, it is not fixed. On the contrary, the fusion of formal element and meaning…is the result of a real process of social development, in the actual activities of speech and in the continuing development of a language…signs can exist only when the active social relationship is posited" (Williams 1977, 37).

Williams's quote throws the only apparent synonymy of *arbitrary* and *conventional* into relief as far as the nature of language is concerned. *Convention* plays a part in the workings of language (i.e. conventional is the relationship between signified and signifier, conventional is meaning and its use in context, and eighteenth-century grammarians would have used the word *custom* to refer to precisely this phenomenon), while *arbitrary* implies a modicum of randomness and chance which would seem to allow for "the essential principle of historical variation," while

never explaining "the historical determination it also implies." (Keach 2004, 10) Hence, Keach's need to pick apart the received notion of the *arbitrary*, firstly, by way of lexicography: Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Etymologically, *arbitrary* derives from the Latin *arbiter* ("one who goes to see", that is, "one who looks into or examines"; the word is thus related to the semantic field of jurisprudence, meaning "relating to, or dependent on, the discretion of an arbiter" (*OED*). Keach chooses to linger on *arbitrary* in its sense of "absolute, despotic, tyrannical", in order to highlight the semantically controversial relationship it entertains with "arbitrary" as contingent on "one's liking; dependent upon will or pleasure", "capricious". These acceptations of the word seen alongside Keach's quotes from both Marxist literature and post-structuralism as embodied by Pierre Bourdieu, are intended to unveil the connection between *arbitrary* as tyrannical and *arbitrary* as random. In this way there emerge "the processes through which the unmotivated and the random acquire the force of absolute power and authority." (Keach 2004, 12) By claiming that language use is not merely arbitrary, but rooted in the social and political context, and showing that the adjective *"arbitrary"* allowed for coherent use by both dissenting left-wing intellectuals and staunch conservatives, Keach strengthens the validity of Romantic critical work that draws the political and the linguistic in Romantic writing together. Moreover, he chimes in with the critical chorus who identifies linguistic attacks to Romantic literary works as politically motivated.

My interest in the *arbitrary* is linguistic and epistemological rather than political. *Arbitrary* is a key term in the context of early modern philosophy of language, Locke's in particular: in its acceptation of "discretionary, not fixed; Derived from mere opinion or preference; not based on the nature of things; hence, capricious, uncertain, varying", *arbitrary* is the keystone to the understanding of the relationship between word, thought and object, the tripartite epistemological structure.

While I concur with Keach's analysis in not considering the words *arbitrary* and *conventional* as synonyms and in believing that language cannot be *random*, I look at the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign through the perplexed eyes of those early-modern philosophers who conceptualized the different nuances of the *arbitrary*: firstly, they did indeed use *arbitrary* as synonymous of *conventional* and, by accepting the conventional nature of language, they severed it from reality and questioned its ability to map the world. *Arbitrary* was further intended as *uncertain* and *varying*: the product of human intervention, language seemed hopelessly dependent on contingency, operating on the shaky foundations of tradition, culture,

custom, and use. The problem was twofold, representational and semantic: on the one hand, philosophers questioned language's ability to represent the world faithfully and accurately; on the other hand, they feared the obvious slipperiness of meaning rising from the apparently loose connection between words and ideas. My contention is that *arbitrary* also came to mean *unpredictable*: a language that was arbitrary was a time bomb, open to change from all directions, and it was that change, disruptive to the social compact, to the possibility of intelligible interaction among people and to the ability to obtain and spread "correct" knowledge, that was felt as threatening, rather than its questioning the political status quo.

The world is mapped through the senses, whose exactness as cognitive and interpretative instruments is doubtful. Early-modern empiricists maintained that the world itself is not known, what is known is people's perceptions of it. Language, unrelated to reality, is in fact related to ideas concerning reality, ideas which find their origin in the sensorial mapping of the world. If the senses themselves are not to be trusted in the first place, then language used to record ideas and impressions acquired through the senses, can only prove unstable.

Language presents other challenges: semantic instability, mendacity, and rhetoric. Semantic instability arises the moment words and things are driven apart: human intervention on the creation of meaning implies the possibility of its continuous redetermination. Instead of being certain and univocal, meaning can be negotiated and constantly recreated. Mendacity is proof of language's ability to misrepresent and distort: since man is potentially unequipped to distinguish between truth and falsehood, mendacious language can cause false ideas to spread, thereby compromising the bonds of sociality. Rhetoric accentuates the rift between words and meanings by playing on their loose connection: it exalts sound to the detriment of semantics and constantly creates new meanings through the use of tropes.

In this work, *arbitrary* has thus come to be a portmanteau qualifier, implying the several degrees of uncertainty to which language was felt to give rise in eighteenth-century England; arbitrariness will be articulated in degrees: the first degree is the irremediable fracture between words and things, the awareness of the *artificiality* of language; the second degree is in the relationship between thoughts and words, because words are strings of meaningless sounds which only acquire semantic value on the basis of their relationships to the ideas they represent; the third degree is in the relative arbitrariness of the relationship between thoughts and things, a relationship which is mediated by the senses, whose reliability is

questionable. The uncertainty provoked by such doubts with regard to cognitive processes haunted early-modern thinkers, whose analyses of language were fraught with fear of the dissolution of reality, which not only seemed to be corruptible by the inadequacy or unreliability of our senses as instruments of mediation, but which was further mediated by the conventional and artificial nature of language. Language had stopped being a mirror to the world and had turned into a distorting glass. Locke's contribution to theories of language did not resolve the anxiety but fostered it.

The Locke Revolution

Locke shares the seventeenth-century unease about language. In fact, his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1690, was the culmination of the preceding philosophical tradition, and laid the foundations for the development of eighteenth-century thought. In the preponderantly epistemological context of the *Essay*, Locke devotes the entirety of *Book III* to language: firstly, he analyses the nature of language; secondly, its imperfections and abuses, his self-confessed aim being "to find the right use of words; the natural advantages and defects of language; and the remedies that ought to be used, to avoid the inconvenience of obscurity or uncertainty in the signification of words, without which it is impossible to discourse with any clearness or order concerning knowledge" (Locke 1997, 363).

Several assumptions underlie Locke's statement: firstly, that "thought depends on language not only for its verbal translation, but also – and above all – for its definition and articulation" (Formigari 1988, 99). Locke claims that thought processes are deeply related to the workings of language, and since the transmission of knowledge happens through words "it is impossible to speak clearly and distinctly of our knowledge … without considering first the nature, use, and signification of language" (Locke 1997, 360). Secondly, Locke believes language possesses *natural* defects, that is, it is inherently flawed. Thirdly, he maintains that language threatens clarity of reasoning and communication, in that it can produce obscurity, due to semantic indeterminacy or opaqueness. These concerns run through *Book III* of the *Essay*, and conspire to constitute a thought-provoking, unsettling theory of language, whose resonance would profoundly influence language studies in the eighteenth century.

Locke espouses conventionalism and founds his linguistic theory on the assumption that words are not things: reification engenders the

misconception that reality can be known through language and not experience, thereby producing faulty knowledge.

> "Of the 'prodigious chimerae' fostered by language, the most dangerous is confusion between the real nature of things and their notions. It is true that words are used to express things; but closer scrutiny shows that they express them only in accordance with the pictures we have of them, and not in accordance with their real nature" (Formigari 1988, 100).

The possibility of natural language is therefore repudiated evoking "an original and unbridgeable gap between language and the world" (Dawson 2007, 113). Lockean theory constitutes the "network linking language and reality … [as] an arbitrary pattern" (Formigari 1988, 99). While he claims that words and things belong to different realms, Locke insists on the connection between words and ideas: man being "a sociable creature," he needs "sensible words" whereby his "invisible ideas might be made known to others" (Locke 1997, 363). Words are meaningless sounds, they acquire meaning only when connected to ideas. In Lockean epistemology, ideas are not innate, but originate in sensorial experience. Things have primary and secondary qualities: primary qualities are inherent to them (e.g. motion, solidity, extension, figure), and exist regardless of our ability to perceive them; secondary qualities are not intrinsic to the objects and are unrelated to their physical existence, but are what produces sensations in us, and sensations produce ideas. While primary qualities are only negligibly accessible to us, secondary qualities constitute our knowledge. If words are connected to our ideas alone, and our ideas are mostly ideas received of secondary qualities, then our words are distortions of reality: by expressing ideas of secondary qualities mediated by our senses, words are twice removed from the real objects, which should be their ultimate referents. For all their causal conformity with things, ideas (and the rational work we do with them) are the limits of our knowledge – and therefore our speech – about the world" (Dawson 2007, 197).

The fact that human perspective determines the verbal description of things, paints a clear picture of the distance between reality and language, and the highly subjective nature of both words and ideas. The frightening implication of such theoretical claims is that "the world is … fundamentally *not* as we see and name it" (Dawson 2007, 125). To complicate matters further, there comes Locke's claim that words and ideas are only arbitrarily (i.e. conventionally, "unnaturally") connected:

> "Words … come to be made use of by men as the signs of their ideas; not by any natural connection that there is between particular articulate sounds

and certain ideas; for then there would be but one language amongst all men; but by a voluntary imposition, whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an idea" (Locke 1997, 363).

Language's already imperfect hold on reality is rendered more tenuous by the arbitrariness of the connection between words and ideas, only cemented through the contingency of "constant use," which "by tacit consent … so far limits the signification of [a] sound, that unless a man applies it to the same idea, he does not speak properly" (Locke 1997, 366).

Locke claims that social compact, that is, the constant connection of a certain word with a certain idea, can actually guarantee functional everyday communication; but, at the same time, he recognizes the vulnerability of custom, whose contingency and essential precariousness are evidenced by the fact that "words … stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them" (Locke 1997, 364).

If a speaker applies words to anything but his/her ideas, he/she misuses them, for those ideas are the object of communication and represent the entirety of his/her knowledge, which is all it is reasonable for him/her to want to communicate to others. Knowledge, Locke is saying, is essentially an individual process: individuals can only know for themselves. Words are a shared system of signs, but despite their supposed shared signification, they are used by individuals to refer to individual ideas, which may differ substantially from those of their fellow-men and women. Locke is here proposing a further level of arbitrariness: the arbitrary nature of the linguistic representation of reality is complemented by the arbitrary connection between words and ideas, to which Locke adds the semi-arbitrary nature of our knowledge of the world and the uncertain quality of the connection every individual realizes in his/her mind between ideas and the words he/she believes correspond to them.

Locke's most provocative critique of language is in the pioneering and far-reaching claim that semantic instability is inherent to language. "The imperfection of words," Locke claims, "is the doubtfulness of their signification" (Locke 1997, 425). Words show no imperfection in their sensible facet because sounds are arbitrary signs and possess no signification of their own. The instability and doubtfulness of their meaning depend on the ideas for which they stand. In order for communication to circumvent semantic instability and misunderstanding, speakers must be wary of the *miscommunicational* dangers in language and must perfect their knowledge of the ideas associated with certain sounds. The imperfection of words is to be ascribed to Locke's statement that words can only ever signify the speaker's ideas.

"Given that ideas do not occur in one generic mind but in the minds of individuals, they will vary accordingly. The corollary of the view that words signify the speaker's particular ideas is that, once uttered, they also signify the hearer's ideas. At all points in a word's travels, meaning is constructed subjectively" (Dawson 2007, 219).

Locke's epistemological theory is here relevant to show that he does not claim communication is impossible: the perceptive faculties of men and women are uniform, therefore those ideas which they acquire through the use of the senses are shared. "Sensible ideas are caused by external things and can therefore be identified and named by the community through ostensive definition" (Dawson 2007, 220). Potential incommunicability sets in because ideas, and words, are not always simple. Simple ideas are actively compounded into complex ones and there lies enormous margin for error and semantic diversity. Complex ideas, and the words used to express them, are "liable to vary from individual to individual, as experience and judgement varies" (Dawson 2007, 221). Locke thus insinuates the possibility that lack of understanding might lie behind verbal interaction. On such ground-breaking foundation, Locke builds his critique of language and infuses some traditional concerns with regard to the abuses of language with new life.

While imperfections are inherent in language, abuses are wilfully perpetrated by speakers. The first abuse Locke mentions is verbal ambiguity, a source of faulty reasoning and incorrect knowledge: sometimes words are used which stand for unclear ideas, or they are used by speakers who are not aware of the ideas for which they stand. Rhetoric[8] is responsible for the second abuse: rhetoricians wilfully exasperate the fissure between words and things. There is a *breach of contract* between sign and signified in which rhetoricians take enormous pride, but which is the source of even further ambiguity and uncertainty for the scientist and the philosopher, because such a wilful disjunction of signs from their semantic counterpart positively misrepresents and misconstrues reality. Another cause of instability lies in the inconstant use of words: when the same sign is used in different contests and with different significations the social compact which has arbitrarily connected certain words to certain ideas is nullified. *Affected obscurity* is another problematic aspect of language use, one whose threat to propriety would be pointed out at length

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[8] Dawson (2007, 211) states that the five elements of rhetoric "had been reduced to one: elocution, the figures and the tropes, whose very job it is to play with words and disrupt their semantic bed."

by eighteenth-century grammarians and lexicographers: the disconnection of words from their meanings is to be ascribed to semantic redetermination, that is, the use of archaic words with new significations; to new coinages, which, not resting on social compact because of their novelty, breed ambiguity; and to compound words, which, by creating unprecedented juxtapositions of words, confound their ordinary meaning. Locke is here pointing his finger at the *art of disputing*, the wilful manipulation of language and the wilful rending of words from things, so as to further mendacious arguments and prove fallacious theories.

Locke ends *Book III* of his *Essay* proposing solutions for a better use of words, he "aspired above all to make language more lucid, logical and unchanging" (Nisbet and Rawson 2005, 336). He recommends attention, lucidity, precision and awareness in the use of words; when awareness in the speaker is not matched by awareness in the hearer, then the former will have to show, exemplify, define, and explain. The call to exactness and awareness on Locke's part is complemented by encouragement to provide better means for the learning and use of language. Locke underlines the importance of using words with propriety, that is, taking care to apply by them "as near as may be, to such ideas as common use has annexed them to"; propriety is thus "that which gives our thoughts entrance into other men's minds with the greatest ease and advantage" (Locke 1997, 457). But not even social compact can put an end to confusion, misunderstanding and obscurity, for "common use being but a very uncertain rule, which reduces itself at last to the ideas of particular men, proves often but a very variable standard" (Locke 1997, 464). Locke then imagines the possibility of recording common usage in order to create better stability: he compares the advantages of classifying language to the advantages inherent in classifications of Natural objects carried out by Naturalists (Locke 1997, 464). The implication is that a faithful observation and description of language use can fix the connection between words and ideas better and they can enhance communication, reducing the risk of obscurity. Eighteenth-century grammarians here found a clear indication of how to proceed and how to remedy the imperfection of words.

Locke's theory frames the discourse on language in the eighteenth century. The implications of his thorough critique underlie assumptions about the acquisition and transmission of knowledge, the communication of truth, the possibility of a faithful representation of reality. Locke insists on the divorce of words from things, thereby considerably questioning the conviction that language may be natural or God-given; he stresses the privileged, yet arbitrary (conventional, capricious, custom-bound, hence socially determined) relationship between words and ideas; he exposes the