

Writing From Wilderness: On the Use and Extension of Keats' "Negative Capability in the Poetics of William Stafford

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Abstract

John Keats coined the phrase “Negative Capability” in a letter to his brother in 1817 when he spoke of a particular “quality” that went into forming a “Man of Achievement” in literature. He define this quality as akin to a state of mind “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason – .” Generally, the term has been understood to refer to a capability utilized by the poet in the early stages of composition. This understanding of the term may owe its origins to Keats' commentary on Coleridge's inability to remain in “mystery” and “half knowledge” in the early phases of composition: “Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge.” The poetics of William Stafford draw upon the theory of Keats and extend it beyond the early stage of writing. This paper examines how Stafford uses the theory of Keats – how he elaborates upon it to – and reaches a fully articulation of its implications.

Key words: John Keats, Negative Capability, poetics, William Stafford, wilderness.

A poem is a serious joke, a truth that has learned jujitsu. Anyone who breathes is in the rhythm business: anyone who is alive is caught up in the imminences, the doubts mixed with the triumphant certainty of poetry.

William Stafford

The poetics of the American poet William Stafford owes much to John Keats' theory of Negative Capability. In this paper, I will look at how Stafford makes use of Keats' theory and extends it. I aim to demonstrate that what Keats injected into the discourse of poetic theory many years ago, via a private letter, has found significant correspondence in the theory and poetry of William Stafford. In this way, I will demonstrate the generative and productive work the theory of Keats' accomplishes in the poetics of William Stafford.

In writing to his brothers George and Tom in 1817, John Keats commented on "what quality went to form a Man of Achievement" in literature (Keats 193). In this letter, he used the term "Negative Capability" and defined it as being something akin to a state of mind or an attitude "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason – . . ."

Shakespeare, Keats tells us, possessed this quality "enormously." Coleridge on the other hand, seems to be faulted by Keats for lacking this quality. Immediately after defining Negative Capability, for example, Keats comments on Coleridge: "Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrarium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge." This comment by Keats on Coleridge is important because it suggests that Negative Capability is something made use of while the poet is in the composing process of writing, and perhaps at the very earliest stages of the writing process. Keats

tells us that Coleridge would let go of some thing encountered in the writing because he couldn't pin it down sufficiently. He couldn't understand what it was, or felt it didn't know what it was. He was "incapable" of remaining content with something he couldn't completely understand or know.

Stafford shows a similar sensibility and awareness to that of Keats when he writes of how he prepares himself for the act of composition. He seems to physically and mentally place himself in a frame of mind, an attitude, which is open and capable of being in uncertainties. He is not running after facts or reasons. In this way, he may be said to be drawing upon Keats' notion of Negative Capability and using the theory:

When I write, I like to have an interval before me when I am not likely to be interrupted. For me, this means usually the early morning, before others are awake. I get pen and paper, take a glance out of the window (often it is dark out there), and wait. It is like fishing. But I do not wait long, for there is always a nibble – and this is where receptivity comes in. To get started I will accept anything that occurs to me. Something always occurs, of course, to any of us. We can't keep from thinking. Maybe I have to settle for an immediate impression: it's cold, or hot, or dark, or bright, or in between! Or – well, the possibilities are endless. If I put down something, that thing will help the next thing come, and I'm off. If I let the process go on, things will occur to me that were not at all in my mind when I started. These things, odd or trivial as they may be, are somehow connected. And if I let them string out, surprising things will happen.

(Stafford 17 WAC)

The way that Stafford speaks of the pre-composition phase of writing sounds very much like the application of the Keatsian theory: “I get pen and paper, take a glance out of the window (often it is dark out there), and wait.” Stafford emphasizes here that for him writing is, in part, a passive activity: a matter of waiting. It does not appear to be a matter of going out in search of something. It is *not* like hunting. It is “like fishing.” Further, Stafford suggests the process occurs in a space of incomplete understanding: “it is dark out there.” In addition to connoting the obvious pre-dawn dark of morning, the word “dark” calls to mind such everyday expressions as “being in the dark,” that is, being in a place of not knowing, not having all the answers, having only partial or incomplete information or understanding.

In the above quotation, we might also begin to discern where and how Stafford begins to extend the Keatsian theory of Negative Capability and apply it to something beyond the pre-compositional phase of writing. We detect this extension when he speaks of needing to be receptive while in the process of writing: “I do not wait long, for there is always a nibble – and this is where receptivity comes in.” This capability of being receptive while showing some relationship to Keats idea of being “capable of being in uncertainties . . . without a reaching after fact & reason” goes further than Keats to provide a working definition of how Negative Capability might actually function in the process of poetic composition. Stafford’s theorizing provides a more complete articulation of what is going on inside poets as they write and remain in the realm of uncertainty: they must be receptive to what is going on between themselves and the language on the page as they proceed – what thoughts, what images, what memories, what emotions, are being called up within them as they move through the writing process.

In responding to being pejoratively tagged a “regional poet” – “regional” in the sense that he writes largely out of his experience of living in the region of northwestern United States: the state of Oregon – Stafford articulates his sense of receptivity to language and process in a conversationally relaxed and yet remarkably precise manner:

. . . doing art takes a kind of sniffing along, being steadfastly available to the signals emerging from encounters with the material of the art – the touches, sounds, balancings, phrasings – and the sequential and accumulating results of encounters.”

To look up from the sniffing, in order to find a critic’s approval or a public’s taste, is to forsake the trail. And the trail is one-person wide, terribly local and provincial: art is absolutely individual in a non-forensic but utterly unyielding way.

Anyone actually doing art needs to maintain this knack for responding to the immediate, the region: for that’s where art is. Its distinction from the academic, the administrative, the mechanical, lies in its leaning away from the past and into the future that is emerging right at the time from the myriadly active, local relations, of the artist. Others – administrator, professors, mechanics, or whoever – can of course also be responsive to where they find themselves: artists have to be. That’s the ground for their art, the place where they live.

(Stafford 10 MNT)

In the paragraphs above, Stafford describes the complex activity involved in the poet's being receptive while in the act of composition: "Doing art . . ." one must remain "steadfastly available to the signals emerging from encounters with the material of the art – . . ." We understand that "doing art," in the poet's case, involves the writing of poetry, and, as such, the poet must remain "steadfastly available" to what is occurring between the poet and the language on the page as the process unfolds: "the sequential and accumulating results of encounters." This "receptivity" that Stafford speaks of is applied – made use of – by the poet in the compositional phase of writing – not merely the pre-compositional phase, as was the case with the Keatsian theory. Stafford distinguishes art, and in this case poetry, from "the academic, the administrative, [and] the mechanical," precisely because it leans away from the past "and into the future that is emerging right at the time from the myriadly active, local relations . . . [This] . . . future that is emerging . . . [is] the ground for their art, the place where they live."

The ability of the poet to be actively receptive at the immediate and local level is one of the distinguishing characteristics upon which Stafford extends the Keatsian theory. In the quotation cited earlier, Stafford details his own movement into the compositional phase: "If I put down something, that thing will help the next thing come, and I'm off. If I let the *process* [my emphasis] go on, things will occur to me that were not at all in my mind when I started. These things, odd or trivial as they may be, are somehow connected." Stafford indicates that he sees writing as a series of events – a "process" and acknowledges both his control and limitations within the process.

As Stafford moves beyond Keats, he remains grounded in a disposition that is Keatsian. That is, as he moves forward into the process of writing, he remains in the region of Negative Capability. He is in the “uncertainties” that Keats spoke of. “Somehow,” he says, these things are connected. He *doesn't know* how. Thus we see Stafford applying the Keatsian theory to both the pre-composition phase of writing, as well as to the later phases of writing. And presumably, Stafford will continue to listen carefully, to be receptive, as he moves deeper into the process through successive drafts of the poem. He will continue to be receptive to the draft's promptings and suggestions until he finds it completed as a poem.

In addition to possessing the capability of receptivity in later stages of composition, Stafford's theorizing calls upon the poet to maintain, develop, or be capable of possessing what he terms a “readiness to fail.” If the poet is going to continue through the writing process – to “keep on writing” – she must be willing to fail:

I must be willing to fail, if I am to keep on writing, I cannot bother to insist on high standards. I must get into action and not let anything stop me, or even slow me much. By ‘standards,’ I do not mean ‘correctness’ – spelling and punctuation, and so on . . . I am thinking about such matters as social significance, positive values, consistency, etc. I resolutely disregard these. Something better, greater, is happening. I am following a process that leads so wildly and originally into new territory that no judgment can at the moment be made about values, significance, and so on.

(Stafford 19 WAC)

“Willingness to fail” in the composition of a poem can be seen as something that draws from Keats and extends his theory forward into a practical application by Stafford, but a fuller understanding of it, and a fuller appreciation of it, would have us looking further back than Keats to Kant. Stafford’s claim, to do away with “standards,” might be understood to mean that he doesn’t sit down to write with a defined purpose. For if, by a kind of reverse logic, the writer had a purpose, he/she would have “standards” that would include the consideration of things such as “social significance, positive values, consistency, etc.” Stafford’s theory of process, as outline here, carries a trace of the Kantian notion of “purposiveness without purpose” – the Kantian notion that I suspect was already embedded in Keats’ formulation of Negative Capability for how can one exist in a place of “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts,” and write out of it, if one were being driven by the impulse to seek a defined end, a purpose (Kant 14)? Purpose is conclusive in so far as it represents a terminus, an aim towards which one is intending, as such, it is antithetical to mystery, doubt, and uncertainty.

What Stafford is able to achieve in this formulation – this emphasis on failure in the process of writing – is to underscore how failure is a part of the writers’ capability to remain in uncertainties. In other words, to really proceed in the process of composition and to remain in a Keatsian world of Negative Capability the writing must come to see “failure” as part of the process, if not the process itself. To understand failure in this way is to see the possibility within it. Just as poets would do well to develop an appreciation for Negative Capability, Stafford suggest they would do well to develop a “readiness” to fail, a further capability.

In theorizing his own poetic practice then, Stafford stays true to Keats: there is

no reaching after fact and reason. He doesn't know how things are connected but believes "somehow they are." He is "following a process," as he puts it below, a process "that leads . . . wildly . . . into new territory." What he finds there, it is important to emphasize, he finds by way of *being led*, not by leading. In the poem, "A Course in Creative Writing," we see much of this theorizing in summary. In a rhetorical fashion, this speaks about the difficulty creative writing students have in understanding the process of writing a poem. The poem attempts to return the students to the "wilderness" of their own minds, to a wilderness that cannot be mapped, a place of Negative Capability, where the students must go if they are to write their way out into a poem:

A Course in Creative Writing

They want a wilderness with a map –
But how about errors that give a new start?
Or leaves that are edging into the light? –
Or the many places a road can't find?

Maybe there's a land where you have to sing
To explain anything: you blow a little whistle
Just right and the next tree you meet is itself.
(And many a tree is not there yet.)

Things come toward you when you walk.
You go along singing a song that says
Where you are going becomes its own
Because you start. You blow a little whistle –

And a world begins under the map.

(Stafford 185 TWII)

Stafford's concept of wilderness as a source of vitality and inspiration – “the world begins under the map” – echoes Thoreau's adage, “In wilderness is the preservation of the world.” Stafford's formulation might be read, “In wilderness – in

the unknown and uncertain – is the preservation of poetry.” In the poem, Stafford likens poetic composition to walking into a wilderness without a map – the poet must write from that place of wilderness. This place, this realm of the imagination, in so far as it is undefined, unmapped, unknown, undisturbed, invites, discovery. For Stafford, poets need not know where they are going in the compositional process, but they must be answerably alert to what the process suggests along the way.

Thus Stafford develops a poetic theory that extends off the Keatsian theory. He follows out the Keatsian theory’s implications to achieve a more detailed articulation of what the earlier theory can actually mean when applied in practice. Stafford’s concepts of active receptivity and readiness-to-fail represent two critical extensions applicable in the later stages of writing.

One way to appreciate what Stafford is suggesting in the poem above is to turn the rhetorical situation of the poem around so that it investigates the following question: “If we were to have a map for our lives, what would be lost of the richness that springs from the unmapped, unknown, unplanned for events of the day? Or, as Stafford questions: “But how about the errors that give life a new start? / Or leaves that are edging into the light? – / Or the many places a road can't find?”

What will happen tomorrow? Or, as a poet may want to ask, “What will happen with this poem I am writing? What will it be about?” For Stafford the impulse behind these questions – the impulse to know – whether in life or in the poem one is writing – are not dissimilar. Stafford reminds us that the *known* is suspect and that the unknown is the stuff of life and poetry. No one knows what tomorrow will bring. We live in a world of incomplete knowledge – in a world of not knowing – a world we continuously investigate and attempt to understand, one day a time.

If a poem is to be truly alive, it must have this quality about it: a sense of active engagement with an uncertain world, and an uncertain existence. There are “many places a road can’t find,” Stafford says, suggesting the poet ready herself to metaphorically step from the car, or off the trail, and head into the unknown, undiscovered wilderness of writing. The poet begins in uncertainty and proceeds mindfully and receptively through all that is immediately occurring, as the process of writing unfolds: “Things come toward you when you walk / You go along singing a song . . .” The poem is created from the ongoing and uncertain event of life, as such it breathes – it lives.

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