

## FORGIVE THE LANGUAGE

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# Forgive the Language

ESSAYS ON POETS & POETRY

Penned in the Margins

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# CONTENTS

The Hidden Life of Poets	11
The Poem is a Question: Keats, Negative Capability and Us	15
James Merrill: Formal Radical	30
Compendium in Time	38
An Earnest Chestnut for Remembrance Day	44
The Search for Eloise Robinson	49
A Hell of an Underwriter: Three Insurance Men with a Difference	57
Because London Is Still a Kaleidoscope	63
There's No Place Like Home: The Poetry of Dorothy Molloy	73
Men's Troubles: Seidel, Ashbery & Elliott	88
To Hull and Braque: Marching to the Drumbeats	98
These Fragments We Have Shored Against Our Ruin	105
Gifts of Earth: Letters of Ted Hughes	119
The Dylan Thomas Question	132
Man of Jazz and Conscience: MacNeice's <i>Autumn Journal</i>	140
Beauty and Meaning: Free the Word!	163
By the Light of the Silvery Moon: Dowson, Schoenberg and the Birth of Modernism	172
Now I'm a Real Boy: Poetry's Plagiarism Problem	188
The Line	193
My Life in Typewriters	213



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For Mom

& I.M. Thomas Vink-Lainas  
1943-2015

*You've got to know the rules to break them. That's what I'm here for, to  
demolish the rules but keep the tradition.*

Alexander McQueen, Savage Beauty, V&A, 2015



## THE HIDDEN LIFE OF POETS

Poetry. At first it's all around us, in nursery rhymes, 'children's poems', at primary school, even in some form on children's television. We learn to speak in rhyme, which is patterned language, and it makes up our earliest games. It's at school. Then it becomes something we 'ought' to do. It's homework. Teachers tell us if we got it right or wrong. We move on.

Poetry is the book your boring aunt gives your sister, maybe, and, maybe, your sister hates it. She wants a giant Teletubbies make-up set instead, and everyone agrees it's really *bo-oring*. From this chance moment, perhaps – the moment you quietly take the book to your room, and know nobody will never miss it – poetry is your secret.

At secondary school, poetry rears its head again, but very much in public. 'What do you think the poet is really trying to say here?' 'Can you interpret the symbolism in the metaphor?' 'Analyse the influences of the Metaphysicals on the conceits of...' Oh, wait. 'Where does the real message of 'The Hitcher' come out?'

It's happening in public, but the real poem is still happening in private. You write the stuff in secret. You read it and print it out and keep it in folders, and gradually you show some of your poems to your friends. They say nice things, but what do they know? And maybe they were the ones who laughed at your boring aunt's book with your sister. So it's still – the work that poetry is doing inside you and your conception of language as a medium through which to perceive the world – a big, fat secret.

This essay could be pages and pages long. But ultimately, there is a point for all of us where there is one big difference between

our poems and the ones in books. They get read by people, and ours don't. They are written TO be read. The poets who write them do so knowing that they are making something for other people to read, and we write ours both from and to the inside of our head.

Don Paterson talks about the various stages of 'publication' as being the biggest transformation in a poem. He says that in one sense a poem is 'published' – broadcast to the outside world – the minute we show it to someone else. Then there's sharing it in a workshop or an email. Then maybe getting it in a magazine. At each remove, the poem becomes the property of (more) other people, not just us.

This of course changes the poem, because it becomes a public artefact, an object to be used, consumed, participated in, by anyone who finds it. And it changes you, because you now have a different relationship to your secret. It has a perfectly acceptable public side.

With this comes a change in how you write your poems. You need to learn to access both the side that's secret within you, and the side that faces outwards: a strange mysterious element that makes your poem A Thing, Made for Other People. Your innermost thoughts aren't much good to them unless framed in a way they can access, empathise their way into, relate back to the world THEY are perceiving, and – with luck – be surprised by.

This is the life cycle of a poet. The hidden life – that secret that made you steal your sister's Christmas present, and the reason you alone ever noticed that it was not on the shelf where it got dumped – carries on. But the poems you make out of that self begin to have a life of their own, beyond you. They have relationships with other people you might think you have nothing in common with whatever. This is about being human.

A poem works on this level in proportion to what it gives to the reader. General reflections of sagacity, or complicated abstract

metaphors about your inner turmoil, are not news; everybody has those. In making a poem for people to read, you are holding something up to the light and saying: “Look! Look at this!” Make sure the reader can *see* what you’re holding up; make it come into *their* space a little, and touch them. Let it *ask* them something, not just tell them all about you. Let it sit there so they can just *be* with it.

This means making sure it’s clear what the poem is about. Putting specific images in, not just Big Ideas. Not bombarding them with how *you* feel, but creating a space where they can feel it *with* you. It means making sure the images all hang together, the examples all tell the same story, the language fits the mood, the rhymes aren’t overpowering.

For many people, the first step out of their hidden life – the first time their secret is aired outside their circle of friends – is sending a poem to a magazine: maybe a local one, or maybe a big, important one which they’ll never get in. For some, the first step is sending it to a competition. This feels safe, it’s all anonymous, you don’t have to have a name. Your secret identity is still secret!

The poem doesn’t get anywhere, of course, in this competition. Except that sometimes it does; because it’s about the poem, not the poet. But in any case, what it HAS done is this: it’s gone and sat in a box with hundreds, maybe thousands, of other poems, all of them poems together, all coming out of the secret space and blinking into the sunshine of an unknown, real *reader*. And maybe, when you think of it sitting in there, you begin to really want your poem to be read by that reader, to be understood, to resonate with them the way other poems have resonated with you. To be, like Pinocchio, alive.

This is an important moment for your poem and for you. It’s the moment the lights come on, and shine into your hidden life. You find you are sitting at the beginning of a road...

## THE POEM IS A QUESTION: KEATS, NEGATIVE CAPABILITY AND US

A long time ago, I was trying to write a poem. I'd had a bad evening — a strange bad evening — with a guy I shouldn't have been having anything to do with, and I wanted to write about it. But it wouldn't come right. I was feeling confused and upset, and didn't know what I thought, much less where to start trying to say it. It was a swirling jumble of feelings, impressions and self-justification. After several false starts I thought I'd take some notes, just to get the facts straight. By taking notes I might arrive at what I thought. I said to myself: *Just say what happened.* So I began:

When you get to the pub you're already drunk —  
You've been down the old Globe or somewhere  
Since lunchtime, and when you come in  
You throw your phone down on the table  
    And start by picking a fight with Jan...  
You're questioning my eye-witness account  
Of a crash that happened outside the office —  
A man just gunned his car at the railing,  
Right into someone — and not by accident —  
And subsequent riot (this very statement  
I note the police believed outright,  
And even wrote it down), while you breathe  
All over me, and fondle my arm.  
You drawl, *I'm playing the devil's advocate.*

Every time I got stuck in the notes, or wasn't sure what I should write next, I thought: *Just say what happened.* When I got to the end of

the notes, I suddenly realised that the last thing that happened –

So then I walk the two miles to work,  
Which gives me time to think – and you know,  
I kind of wish things were different.  
I'm fishing around for my keys in my bag  
When I notice the bloodstains still on the pavement.

– mirrored the first; and what I had thought was a list was in fact a series of lines; and that the notes *were* the poem, and it told me what I was feeling. The incident had taken care of itself, had done its own work in this poem. I called it, ironically, 'The Crash (A Love Letter)'.

*Write what you know.* That's what we hear. Even schoolchildren are given this advice, whose whole job in the world is to be curious and find everything out. But how do you even know what you know? And really, what does anyone know?

The other adage, which crops up even more frequently is this one: *Show, don't tell.* Generations of writers have been given this advice. Presumably it applies after the writer has figured out what they do and don't know. Once you've figured out what you're writing about, *Show, don't tell* works – right up to the moment when it doesn't.

What it 'means', of course, is that the writer should use concrete nouns ('no ideas but in things,' said William Carlos Williams) instead of abstractions (of which Ezra Pound told poets to 'go in fear'). Modernism taught us to rely on images, which we are told are things we can see (but tell that to Pound, who called an image 'an emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time'), instead of ideas (and tell *that* to Wallace Stevens).

What I propose, for the good of literature and writers of all

ages and backgrounds, is to turn both of these cosy little notions on their heads, and instead tell our young people:

1. Write what you don't know.
2. Ask, don't tell.

It's perfectly safe: they will naturally filter their questions and their doubts through what they *do* know, so no one will be hurt.

In 1817, Keats wrote a letter to his brothers, who had gone to America. His letters were long and chatty, and combined gossip, familial concern, news, and his thoughts about what he was working on, as well as reading. This one contained a small paragraph that comes down to us now like a small meteor, or a magic crystal. He wrote:

'...at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously — I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason...'

Negative Capability. Careers have been based on defining this phrase, and this was the only time he used it.

One website ([keatsian.co.uk](http://keatsian.co.uk)) has this interesting thing to say about Negative Capability:

This description can be compared to a definition of conflict: 'An emotional state characterized by indecision, restlessness, uncertainty and tension resulting from incompatible inner needs or drives of comparable intensity'.

These two definitions are very similar; the meaning of conflict sounds

very negative and hopeless. However, Keats' creative concept seems positive and full of potential by leaving out 'restlessness' and avoiding an 'irritable reaching after fact and reason'.

In another letter, Keats says that the 'poetical character... has no self — it is everything and nothing — it has no character and enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated — it has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. [...] A Poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no identity, he is continually filling some other body.'

The essay mentions the idea of 'not imposing one self upon the doubts and uncertainties which make up a conflict', and goes on:

The word 'doubt' is from the Latin, 'dubitare' and comes from 'two' as in two minds. In most conflicts, two people (i.e. two minds) oppose each other. Yet instead of fighting the other, Keats finds the situation to be one that is open for creativity.

So, Negative Capability is not about a capability as such, and it isn't about being 'negative'. The phrase can possibly be understood in the light of two other ways in which we use the word 'negative'. One of them is the photographic negative — which contains all the information necessary for the picture, but does not yet present it — and the other is the concept of negative space. That is the space that surrounds the subject of the picture; it's everything except the thing you think you're looking at, and it defines the thing you're looking at. If all you are doing is 'telling' about' or 'showing' the thing you think you're looking at, you are missing (as Keats seems to be telling us) most of the information.

The other thing that makes the term confusing is this word:

capability. Nowadays we would be more likely to call it a capacity. It's a capacity for sitting in the moment (but it's a moment that encompasses all other moments); for effacing our own observing, classifying, self-oriented ego and sitting open to frequencies that we may not understand. This is not the same as 'mindfulness'; it's more about getting past your mind.

TS Eliot's essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' addresses the same idea. This is the essay where the famous quote originates, that: 'Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.' This begins to come to it, but there is something more specific, nuanced, and pertinent earlier on in the essay:

...the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality.

Shakespeare crops up in Keats' paragraph; he also appears in Eliot's essay. It is Negative Capability or something like it that Eliot is referring to when he says, 'Shakespeare acquired more essential history from Plutarch than most men could from the whole British Museum'. One might call it the ability to extrapolate with intuition.

Robert Browning, that master of other people's voices and their self-delusions, is quoted in the website above: 'I walk, I behold that that I can be and become anything I look at and reach an understanding'. And in a line from *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf wrote: 'Mrs Ramsay looked intently until she became the things she looked upon.' This seems to get at something. It certainly would, if

Mrs Ramsay were a writer; what Woolf has done here is give Mrs Ramsay her own capacity.

If we approach the idea of Negative Capability from these angles, we begin to see that 'looking intently' in this way is less about already knowing the thing than it is about being open to the thing, about clearing space inside so you can absorb it – and definitely more like asking about it than telling about it.

As writers, we can regard a poem, almost any poem, as an act of questioning. This is in line with Don Paterson's remark that for poets, 'rhyme' is a verb, not a noun. If we accept that a poem is an act of questioning, then the world can be treated as a question, and you, the poet, act as the question mark. The answer to the question is arrived at through the medium of complete openness. This is not extinction of the personality, as in a squashing or suppressing; it's more like a thinning of it which enables it to absorb and contain other things.

There's another state of uncertainties and doubts a person can be in, and learn to occupy, of course; that's a state we tend to pathologise nowadays as 'depression' – which people used to call 'melancholy'. Keats himself was prone to the condition and wrote one of his greatest poems on the subject, in doing so epitomising his Negative Capability in action. The poem was a means of enacting a question – or that irritable reaching – and overcoming it:

No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist  
Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;  
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd  
By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine...

This poem begins *in media res*, with an answer: 'No, no, go not to Lethe'. So there is a question, hanging modestly in the background.

And the poet is still asking it even as he goes into fantastic detail, describing its many permutations. You might say the question is something like: *How do I live with this?*

Note how Keats never talks about his own feelings. But he certainly has these feelings, because otherwise he couldn't write, 'But when the melancholy fit shall fall/ Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud'; if he didn't, he couldn't give such detailed instructions for encompassing the torment. He makes a startling exhortation to 'feed deep, deep' on the anger in one's lover's eyes, right after the instruction to 'glut' one's sorrow – and then goes on:

She dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die;  
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips  
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,  
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:  
Ay, in the very temple of Delight  
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine...

This is the crux, the place from which the contradictions emanate. And he still goes on – saying that only those who can experience true joy can even appreciate the shrine – i.e., the place of worship – of this mysterious veiled goddess. And that their souls will be given to her as 'cloudy trophies'. And that's if you can experience joy! This is living with(in) the contradiction.

Notice again that first line: 'No no...' In everything exists its opposite. So Keats is clearly imagining, and inviting the reader to imagine, a scenario where he's said 'Yes, yes...' Yes, go to Lethe, go to sleep, take the opium, dull your senses. Let the shades come to you, as they certainly will if you make yourself a shade.

Two hundred years later and in a different register completely,

another poem that appears to embody Negative Capability is Philip Gross' 'Elderly Iceberg off the Esplanade', from his collection, *Water Table* (Bloodaxe, 2010).

Last night it came knocking, a first  
since the end of the Ice Age. A stray eddy brought it,  
a backhander from the Gulf Stream. It was heading  
inland, could it be to spawn?

It had jumped ship from the loosening Arctic,  
was a waster, pock-marked, sunken-featured,  
in its mud mac. Lurked in the sea lane, only wanted love.  
Was a monster, unnaturally born...

The poem goes about observing this iceberg, giving it a set of qualities, then another, then another: 'unassuming little thing'; 'huge/ in no definite sense'; 'past help, on the edge of extinction'. It's a state of very active imaginative observation — something that can't happen if you already think you know what you'll see.

...It wasn't the last,  
just a message from lastness, a crumpled  
brown parcel from an unsuspected  
awful aunt who might

just turn up any day to stay. Naturally  
it was impossible; such things have to be  
believed...

... Let it go.  
This world should not detain it.  
It would do the same for you.

It's impressive how much empathy Gross applies to this iceberg, how he reels in his effects. Observed and described, characterised, the iceberg never becomes anything but an iceberg (except symbolically); it never becomes anthropomorphic. It is thoroughly an iceberg.

There are questions, suppositions, changes of view here: it's a poem of working-out. Look at how the stanzas enact that *dubitare* sense of things described above, accommodating conflicts, and how the final line hangs off the end of each one – perhaps like an iceberg. Even the half-sentence, 'Call it a bad dream/ if you like', contains two provisional qualifications, and these are followed by evidence-gathering: 'when I looked this morning'... The stanza after this contains three negatives about one small word: silt. The last line of the poem is all the more shocking for being actually reasonable. It arrives as a conclusion, not a destination.

A poem can be said to have two phases, or two obvious ones among many. One is the process of its making, where it's all contingent, in draft, not yet together in its pieces; the other is its existence as a made object, which exists as something whole, inevitable, immutable. One belongs to the poet, and one to itself – and to the reader. When a poem has attained the second state it should be feasible for the poet to answer a questioner in the manner of Harold Pinter: 'It's in the text'. It is something a person can read and – at least emotionally – comprehend.

I'm using that last word 'comprehend' in its sense of, not 'understand', but 'encompass'. A student of mine once addressed this issue, saying, 'I'm making assumptions about poems I really like – assuming that they knew where they were going when they were in the process of writing.' But uncertainty is the basis of everything that's any good. The author knew the story but not how to achieve all its stages. The poet knew the last line but now how to get to it. The writer knew something but not how to say it. The point was polemic

but images and metaphors suggested themselves. The poet listened.

The made poem, in its second phase, operates on both the inside, where the working-out took place, and on the outside, as an artefact being presented to the world. On the inside, the poet has been open to minute vibrations, symbol, and multiple meanings — like a spider’s web or satellite dish. And the outside is like the hard carapace. The signals have been filtered. Meaning has been snapped into place, shaping the material to suggest answers to the questions.

I often think of an interview James Stewart gave, about his big drunk scene in *The Philadelphia Story*. In this scene he is crashingly, excitedly, incredibly drunkenly drunk, and goes to see Cary Grant. He’s a bit in love with Katharine Hepburn and is also a journalist in possession of a great story. It’s totally exhilarating, completely and joyously convincing. The interviewer asked Stewart: how did you do it? Stewart said it had struck him that when actors go to play a drunk man, they tend to try to act drunk; but that every drunk man is trying to act sober.

I also read, a while ago, an interview with Tom Stoppard in which he said: ‘most people have a misapprehension that a play comes out of an idea, whereas ‘in reality the idea comes out of the play’. The article went on, ‘He acknowledges how powerful theatre with a message can be, but “a play works or doesn’t work on an emotional level”.’

This is a big arrow pointing us towards what needs to be contained or encompassed within a poem:



THAT WHICH WILL HELP THE READER FEEL EMOTIONAL TRUTH

Not the poet’s daily emotions, as we have seen above, but the significant, depersonalised, poetically realised emotion.

Michael Donaghy, in his workshops, used to hold his