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Negative Capability: Theory and Practice in the Poetry of John Keats

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Abstract:

John Keats existed for the sake of poetry. Once he wrote to his friend Reynold, “I find I cannot exist without poetry-without external poetry.”¹ As per the present research topic is concerned it deals with the Negative Capability, the most argumentative theory of the young romantic poet John Keats. He had a high conception of the function of poetry. According to him the aim of poetry is to make man happier and better. Excellent poetry should be intense, “Capable of making all disagreeable evaporate from their being in close relationship with beauty and truth.” Like most of the romantic poets, Keats is highly with the idea of form and style, besides the sublime role of imagination in forming poetry. His experience in life and his poetic gifts are the most important factors that shaped his views and tendencies of poetry. His experience came from his wide reading of art and literature of the different languages and associations with men of letters like Hazlitt’ Brown, Dilke, Leigh Hunt, Benjamin Robert Haydon, Benjamin Bailey and others. Keats first coined the term, “Negative Capability” in his discussion of the qualities of, “Man of Achievement” in one of his letters to his brothers George and Thomas Keats in 22nd of December 1817. In that very letter Keats speaks of Several things dove-tailed in my mind, and 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.²

Keywords: External poetry, Negative Capability, Argumentative theory, Disagreeable evaporate, sublime, Imagination, achievement, Literature

Introduction:

John Keats as one of the major poets of Romanticism composed multiple popular poems and his Odes gain the most attention of them. Going through his odes, it appears to the readers that Keats attempted to deal with different interpretations of pain and pleasure concepts. For Keats, the necessary precondition of poetry is submission to things as they are, without trying to intellectualize them into something else, submission to people as they are without to indoctrinate or improve them. This quality is his understanding of contrary points of view. It may be interpreted as tolerance, as agnosticism or as eclecticism

Although Keats's phrase 'Negative Capability' is not in the nature of a philosophical concept, it provides a rare insight into creative psychology which condition the character of an art work. What has he in mind is clear, Shakespeare is able to dramatize a diversity of attitudes a temperament and his imaginative flexibility, is such that in a great play like Henry IV or Hamlet, characters seem to have remarkable autonomy, we don't feel that characterization is being manipulated in the interests of some propagandist's statement. Nevertheless, Keats's notion of 'negative capability' under estimate the often complex but firm control exerted by Shakespeare's co-ordinating imagination. A clear and consistent series of moral and political recommendations emerge from the rich diversities of the various plays. The 'Negative Capability' idea is a half-truth, for though the great artist gives life to a wide variety of human possibilities, those possibilities are purposefully co-ordinated. What is important about the notion for Keats is that it was an enabling half- truth. As a stroke, it enabled him to convert a liability into an asset. The liability was his lack of system or doctrine, 'Negative Capability' was a licence to regard such a lack as liberation. Keats had often felt that he lacked the raw materials for great art, 'Negative Capability' gave him confidence and implied the dialectical basis for the structure of future poems. He developed the idea in the following year by declaring (27 October 1818) that 'poetic characters' has much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen.³

Theory of Negative Capability:

First of all, the literal meaning of the term will be explored because the term Negative Capability seems to an odd paradox for many people. It is like saying active passiveness or motion without movement. This vagueness may well be resolved when explaining the intended literal meaning of composed words, Negative and Capability. In the western civilization, the word, "Negative" has many connotations, It may be rejection, refusal, nothingness, or disagreement. However Keats used the term to signify nothingness or free of something, mainly troubles and worries. On the other hand, the word 'Capability' has a Greek origin "Capacious" which means able to hold much, roomy, space, spacious.⁴ Thus, Capability is related to "capacity" as well as "ability" used together to refer to the largest space that can be held and developed by a container for a particular purpose. Brought together, Negative Capability refers to the space in one's mind which is free from life's troubles and can be used and developed for certain purposes.

In December 1817 John Keats returning he Christmas Pantomime with his friends Charles Wentworth Dike and Charles Brown. On the way to home, he later told his brothers George and Tom, he got into a 'disquisition' with Dike on a number of subjects: several things dovetailed in my mind, and once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of achievements 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-Coleridge for instance, would let to go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetration of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content without half knowledge.⁵

It is a famous passage, “and it is entirely characteristic of Keats that he should come up with one of his most telling phrases (“Negative Capability”) in such an impromptu fashion, without preamble or lengthy explanation. What does Keats mean by ‘Negative Capability’ clearly he is using the word negative not in a pejorative sense, but to convey the idea that a person’s potential can be defined by what he or she does not possess- in this case a need to clever, a determination to work everything out. Essential to literary achievement, Keats argues is a certain passivity, a willingness to let what is mysterious or doubtful remain just that.”

His fellow poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge suggests, “would do well break off from his relentless. Search for knowledge and instead contemplate something beautiful and true (‘a fine verisimilitude’) caught, as if by accident, from the most secret part (Penetralium) of mystery. The experience and intuitive appreciation of the beautiful is, indeed, central to poetic talent, and renders irrelevant ends. His brief discussion of Negative Capability by concluding that ‘with a great poet the sense of beauty overcomes every other consideration, rather obliterates all consideration’”.⁶

As a poetic theory, Negative Capability had its seeds in theatre. It is important to mention that Keats’s relation with men of letters has affected his poetic ideals. His interest in theatre owed much to Charles Brown, who first met Keats in 1814. He had lent his silver ticket to Keats to freely enter the Drury Lane for famous performance.⁷ Noteworthy, Shakespeare played an immediate impact on Keats’s poetic tendencies. Besides possessing Negative Capability, Keats considered Shakespeare as the ‘miserable and mighty poet of human heart.’⁸ Hence Keats had attended most of the performances of Shakespearian dramas played by the representatives of the English stage of romanticism, Edmund Kean (1787-1833). This very actor has played an immediate inspiration to Keats’s doctrine of Negative Capability. Kean’s acting of famous characters like Shylock, Hamlet, Macbeth, and Richard III not only appealed to Keats but also shed light on certain basic ideas related to arts. In one of his reviews, Hazlitt commented on the defects and virtues of Kean’s acting. However, Keats found no defects in Kean’s acting. Thus, he wrote a review on Kean as a Shakespearian actor in 1817. What is particularly interesting, in that very review, is Keats’s references to Kean’s interest in small details or, “immortal scraps” and the “indescribable gusto” in his voice.⁹ Keats has borrowed the word “gusto” from Hazlitt, his literary guide, whose writings have “stimulated new ideas” in Keats and “developed the existing ones.”¹⁰

Hazlitt has used the word in his essay on art and painting under the title “on Gusto” originally, Hazlitt used the word to refer to the “power or passion defining any object” in art.¹¹ In other words, gusto, to Hazlitt, refers to the feeling that an object is able to arise in the recipient’s mind. Accordingly, Titian’s paintings have a great deal of gusto for “Not only do his heads seem to think- his bodies seem to feel sensitive and alive all over.”¹² Keats however used the word in rather different sense. He used the word to mean intensity which “supersedes older term ‘nature’ and ‘universality’ as a first order criterion for poetic development.”¹³ Keats used it to refer to ability of making things seem real and alive. A quality that seems to be basic in all arts including drama as he had stated in the beginning of

the negative capability letter, “The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all ‘disagreeable’ evaporate, from their being in close relationship with beauty and truth.”¹⁴ Drama, then, was one of the most important stimuli to Keats theory.

The Poetic Character:

Keats never repeated the phrase “Negative Capability” in his letters. Like similar nuggets found throughout his correspondence, it is of the moment, prompted by a desire to share his latest thoughts with his friends; It is not part of an overarching intellectual structure. But it is prefigured in a slightly earlier letter, written to Benjamin Baily on 22 November 1817, in which Keats observed that he was unable to see ‘how anything can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning.....can it be that even the greatest Philosopher ever arrived at his goal without putting aside numerous objections-However it may be, O for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts.’¹⁵

And Keats touched again on the idea of the passivity humility even, of a great writer, in a letter he wrote to his friend Richard Woodhouse on 27 October following year. The ‘poetic character he maintained,

Is not itself-it has no self-it is everything and nothing-It has no character –it 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 Iago (the villain of Shakespeare’s Othello) as an Imogen (Shakespeare’s play Cymbeline). What shocks the virtuous Philosopher delights the camelion poets. ¹⁶It does no harm from relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for bright one because they both end in speculation. A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; he has no identity. He is continually informing and filling other body ¹⁷

This power enables the poet to imaginatively identify himself with the object he is dealing with. Beauty and truth is the result of this identification. Keats himself enjoyed this power. Severn and Haydon were the first to notice Keats’s ability to enter into the identity of things. The latter stated that “the humming of the bee, the sight of the flower, the glitter of the sun, seemed to make his nature trembling.”¹⁸ Hence the poet’s imaginations must be open and free to all suggestions beyond his knowledge to enable him to get outside his perception and discover the truth and enjoy beauty of the existence. This is exactly what Keats called for, in his theory, and did apply in his “Ode to the Nightingale” and “Ode on the Grecian Urn.”

Some critics consider these two Odes, both written in 1819, as the most important in the whole work of Keats. Robert Gittings says that the “130 lines” of the odes give a “good idea of Keats’s characteristic poetic style.”¹⁹ In “Ode to a Nightingale” Keats attempts to enter into the world of Nightingale is which totally different from the human world. He held a comparison between the mortality of human life and immortality of the Nightingale’s song. This experience is supported by a metaphorical description of losing of the self to the imaginatively united with the bird. When the poet- speaker first heard the singing of the bird at night, he admits that:

My heart aches a drowsy numbness pains
 My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk.
 Or emptied dull opiate to the drains
 One minute past, and lethe –wards had sunk:(st..1II.1-4)²⁰

The ache that the poet feels is not a physical one it is rather the soul desire to experience the beauty of nature which the bird is part; hence, “It’s not through envy of thy happy lot,/ But being too happy in thine happiness”(II.5-6). This desire, as it were, makes the speaker indulged in the nightingale’s singing. Albert Guerard, Jr. argues that the poem contains a longing for “a free reverie of any kind.”²¹ Hence, he feels as if he has a hemlock that gets him passive, his senses numbed and he leaves “the world unseen /And with thee fade away into the forest dim.”

However, the poet, at the end, makes his mind to choose the “viewless wings of Poesy” instead of wine; for it helps him to: Fade far away, dissolve and quite forget What thou among the leaves hast never known, The, where men sit hear each other groan, where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs, Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies.”(st.2,II.1-26)

The ode has been framed by the association of words, the words “weariness” and “fret” are connected with the idea of man’s insight: “Where but to think is to be full of sorrow.” Thinking of the troubles of life represents an obstacle to enjoy the beauty and the truth of the world. This is a logical trouble of life for the “happy lot” that nightingale enjoys; the source of the bird’s mirth is that she “hast never known” people’s worries of time and death.

However, the latter ode shows Keats’s attempt to get into the static life representation in the pictures engraved on the Urn, which has passed many centuries to reach the time of the observer. The ode, as a matter of fact, is framed by the doctrine of Negative capability in many senses. First, in the negative capability letter, there is a reference to the visual arts, to which the urn belongs. Secondly, the urn is the work of art that possesses a great gusto; it has a power that may affect the viewers and arise certain feelings in him. Thirdly, there are many “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts” around the figures on the urn that urged the poet to find balance of all the “disagreeable” raised in his mind. Finally, the use of the phrase “beauty and truth” which is mentioned in the letter, in the final stanza of the ode.

It is worthwhile that he is highly interested in visual arts. Ian Jack states that “Keats’s interest in painting and sculpture sharpened his own powers of observation and helped him to maintain that balance between the introvert and extrovert which is triumphantly evident in his mature poetry.”²¹ Painting from literary sources was common fashion at that time. Keats, in this sense, was with the main current, for he knows...how to paint a picture of his own. By allowing his imagination to work in the way in which a painter worked, he could produce a passage of which we cannot say whether it is based on a particular work of art or not.”²²

Looking into the pictures painted on the urn, Keats's worries seem to vanish. The speaker (The poet himself) starts to address the urn by applying apostrophe:

Unravish'd bride of quietness,
-child of silence and slow time,
Rain, who canst thus express
Ale more sweetly than our rhyme (st.1,II.1-40)

Conclusion:

Keats attached great importance to imagination, as Coleridge attached importance to fancy. The Negative capability of a true poet is not the result of any intellectual process, it results from imaginations. Keats was always suspicious of reason; he believed in imagination alone. In one of his letters he wrote, "What the imagination seizes as beauty must be true." Poetry can create Beauty through imagination. Like Shakespeare, Keats himself was "of imagination impact". It was with the help of his rich imagination that he could make his poems spontaneous. Hence Negative capability is a state of concentration. It is far from being a disperse state, in the sense that disperse is a sort of reaction towards ideas or objects. It lacks the intensity that negative capability state may offer to men of genius. To reach negative capability, the poet must go through three stages, i.e. annihilating his identity, unified with the object, hence, getting the ability to explore the external beauty and truth implied in them. However, many writers claimed that they have that sort of ability, like Coleridge, Byron, Browning, T. S .Eliot and the Novelist Virginia Woolf. To sum up Negative capability is a very important theory which originated from John Keats and has been applied in many fields of knowledge.

End Notes:

1. Gosh. H, John Keats selected poems, page 32
2. Robert Gittings, John Keats London: Heinemann, 1973, 71
3. Dr Saxina, John Keats selected poems, p, 89
4. Maurice Buxton Forman ed., The Letters of John Keats, London: Oxford university press, 1948, page 71
5. H. E Rollins, The letters of John Keats, vol.2, Cambridge: Cambridge University press 1958, page, 193-94
6. The letters, pp 201
7. Robert Gittings, John Keats, p, 171
8. From a letter to Miss Jeffery, 9th June 1819. The letters, 346. For more information about Shakespeare impact on Keats, please see Caroline F.E Spurgeon, Keats's Shakespeare: A Descriptive study Based on New Material. London: Oxford University press, 1929
9. Susan J. Wolfson, The Cambridge companion to Keats , London: Cambridge university press, 2001, 157. Actually, Keats wrote this review on 19 or 20 December, 1817, and it was published in the Champion, on 21 December. Hence, it is written just few days before the negative capability letter.

10. Andrew Motion, Keats ,USA: university of Chicago press, 1993 .page,333
11. John Cook ed., William Hazlitt: selected Essays New York: Oxford university press, 2009 ,pp.266-70. Hazlitt's "On Gusto" was published in The Examiner, May 26th, 1816.
12. The letters, 67
13. M.H Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the critical Tradition. New York, Oxford university press, 197,136.
14. The letters ,71
15. H.E Rollins, The letters of John Keats,vol.2.Cambridge: Cambridge university press 1958. page 185.
16. Ibid.,pp.386-7
17. Ibid., p 387
18. Ibid., p.184
19. Robert Gittings, John Keats: The living year, London: HEINEMAAN,131

20. The text of the two odes under discussion are taken from Maurice Buxton Forman ed., The poetic works of John Keats: London Oxford university press, 1950. "Ode to a Nightingale,"pp.230; "And Ode on a Grecian urn, " pp.233.
21. Ian Jack, Keats and The mirror of arts ,Oxford: The Clarendon prepress,1967,140

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