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Recommended Citation

Pladek, Brittany, "Keats In and Out of Place: Reviews of *Keats's Negative Capability* and *Keats's Places*" (2020). *English Faculty Research and Publications*. 570.

https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_fac/570

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European Romantic Review, Vol. 31, No. 4 (2020): 505-509. [DOI](#). This article is © Taylor & Francis (Routledge) and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). Taylor & Francis (Routledge) does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from Taylor & Francis (Routledge).

Keats In and Out of Place

Keats's Negative Capability: New Origins and Afterlives, edited by Brian Rejack and Michael Theune, Liverpool, Liverpool UP, 2019, x + 291 pp., 6 illustrations. *Keats's Places*, edited by Richard Marggraf Turley, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, x + 305 pp., 16 illustrations.

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At face level, these two valuable collections seem very different in their contribution to Keats studies. *Keats's Negative Capability* takes as its focus a multifaceted term that has, as many of its essayists note, been reinterpreted so widely that it seems no longer to belong properly to Keats the historical poet. *Keats's Places*, on the other hand, is literally grounded in that poet's life, his personal connections, and physical environment. As such the collections are tonally and formally distinct. *Negative Capability* contains sixteen pointed essays whose historical, topical, and methodological breadth is united by a shared anxiety about their subject's coherence; the thirteen essays in *Keats's Places* take mostly leisurely strolls through the terrain of Keats's life, strolls no less pleasurable for their familiarity. Yet as the late Michael O'Neill argues of Keats and P. B. Shelley in his essay for the *Places* collection, the two meet on the ground of each other's differences. In distinct ways, both volumes ask provocative questions about what a literary essay can—or should—be.

Keats's Negative Capability: New Origins and Afterlives is organized as a rough chronology. Its four sections follow negative capability from its conception in Keats's December 1817 letter to his brothers, through its long reception, in Keats's time and our own. The earlier essays all variously work to unsettle the twin myths of negative capability as a stroke of isolated genius or a stable system within Keats's own thought. In this they push repeatedly against Walter Jackson Bate's influential reading of negative capability as "an imaginative openness

of mind and heightened receptivity to reality in its full and diverse concreteness” (Bate 233–63), as well as Li Ou’s 2009 monograph, the latest book-length effort to systematize Keats’s idea. The later essays range more widely, examining everything from negative capability’s influence on clinical psychoanalysis (David Sigler) to its use in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy (Suzanne L. Barnett). Four pieces address negative capability’s influence on twentieth-century American poetry, a choice that reflects the nationality of the volume’s contributors and editors, but also, as Robert Archambeau’s essay points out, the peculiar resonance of negative capability for a poetic era defined by persistent attachments to “unresolved doubt and uncertainty” (153).

The volume has a productive formal tension between essays with linear arguments and those that take a more explorative approach. Examples of the former include two excellent pieces by Carmen Faye Mathes and Kurtis Hessel. Both condense complex historical contexts into a small space before unspooling them into deft literary readings. Mathes’s essay shows how early female readers of Keats, unlike later feminist interpreters, distanced themselves from the poet’s perceived effeminacy through a respectful pity towards his death, which they saw as evidence of his prophetic control over his own legacy (67). Hessel reads negative capability as a model for Keats’s dual professional commitments to medicine and poetry, offering a sharp reading of *Lamia* as an allegory for a negatively capable approach to disciplinarity. Of the more explorative essays, Brian Rejack’s saunter through an archival “what if” and Anne C. McCarthy’s review of westernized Zen readings of negative capability offer two very different examples of how scholarship can act as a map as well as a compass, delineating a landscape of possibilities rather than guiding readers in a single direction. Rejack’s delightful, meticulously-researched piece asks whether John Jeffrey’s transcription of Keats’s 1817 letter is accurate, then considers the consequences of the fact that it probably isn’t. Similarly, McCarthy’s reflective essay traces an “eccentric, nonlinear history” between readers of Keats influenced by Zen, describing a mode of negatively-capable reception that seeks “subliminal connections” rather than the historicist’s smoking gun (244). Both pieces are explicit about their distance from the traditional, claims-based literary essay. McCarthy even names this distance a “negatively capable reading practice” for its embrace of “contingent, non-binary modes of interpretation” (236).

In doing so, she outlines the obverse of an anxiety that haunts the volume more broadly. This anxiety first appears in its introduction, where editors Rejack and Theune cite the frequent complaint that negative capability has been so “bandied about that [it has] come to mean just about anything” (4). Many of the essays in *Negative Capability* take up arms against this charge, conceding that negative capability risks becoming “an empty cliché” before celebrating its flexibility (154). Repeatedly firing this same strawman has the effect of begging the question, making it loom larger over the volume’s essays than it otherwise would. Thankfully, the essays bear the burden well. Their disagreements about what negative capability can and can’t mean give the volume a conversational dynamism; even their anxiety resembles the urgency of a spirited argument between friends—appropriate, given the genesis of negative capability in Keats’s own conversation with Charles Brown and Charles Wentworth Dilke on their walk back from the Christmas pantomime (the subject of the collection’s opening essay by Brian Bates). As Jonathan Mulrooney’s afterward notes, the collection’s dissonance is “its most Keatsian” feature (262).

A more unexpected effect of the volume’s anxiety about negative capability’s flexibility is underscoring how it skirts some of the thornier quandaries posed by that flexibility. For example, following Rejack and Theune, many essays hail negative capability’s injunction to remain suspended, undecided. But what does *undecided* mean in a polarized cultural climate like the one Keats faced (not to mention our own)? How do writers reconcile “being in uncertainties” with the urgency of political action? For a collection so invested in negative capability’s contemporary resonance, its approaches to such questions are oddly oblique—Emily Rohrbach’s claim that negative capability captures Keats’s skepticism towards Enlightenment myths of historical progress, or Jeanne Britton’s argument that negative capability demonstrates an “acquiescence to cultural belatedness” (110).

Similarly, the collection's several essays that read negative capability in terms of Keats's "camelion Poet" letter mostly sidestep the ethics of poetic identification. For example, Arsevi Seyuran's reading of negative capability in Elizabeth Bishop's work praises Bishop's accumulative realism as leading to self-effacement in which the poet elicits "the object's own expressed truth" (178). But in Keats's "camelion Poet" letter, poets inhabit people as well as objects—a claim that is less straightforward to celebrate and that within the collection itself is only addressed by those essays that reference older feminist readings of Keats's "weak ego boundaries" (Carmen Faye Mathes, Eric Eisner, Suzanne L. Barnett). For all its dynamic dissonance, then, *Keats's Negative Capability* is unified by the limits it sets on the spheres negative capability might address, much as Robert Archambeau explains how postwar American poets' disagreements unite in their faith that, if nothing else, good poetry is negatively capable (153).

By contrast, the unities of *Keats's Places* are primarily affective. If many essays in *Negative Capability* feel anxious, nearly all in *Keats's Places* are relaxed and perambulatory. They wander through Keats's life and encourage readers to do the same. In his introduction, editor Richard Marggraf Turley argues that the collection aims to show that Keats was as embedded in his landscapes as was Wordsworth. If this is the volume's thesis, it does not prove it, for the gratifying reason that its essays refuse to restrict Keats's relationship with place to Wordsworthian models. Rather, the essayists approach "place" much as those of *Negative Capability* approach their key term, as something unfixed and multivalent. Their accumulated efforts finally offer not a Wordsworthian appreciation of Keats's places, but a Keatsian questioning of what "place" might mean.

Of the volume's several answers to that question, perhaps the most common is that place means people. Many essays use "place" to describe a nexus of personal relationships, even if those relationships unfold in a specific geographical area. Greg Kucich's essay on the "Vale of Health" is really about Keats's entrée into Leigh Hunt's circle; Hrileena Ghosh's on Guy's Hospital is really about Keats's documented or speculative encounters with other medical students there. Even Meiko O'Halloran's essay on the Scottish walking tour advances through Keats's imagined meetings with Wordsworth, Burns, and Dante. The volume's most attentive essay, by Michael O'Neill, dispenses with the conceit of place-as-geography altogether, offering a compelling account of how Keats and Shelley lean towards one another's metaphysics when they greet each other in the space of their poetry. The sensuous Keats idealizes his use of "beauty" after reading Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty"; Shelley's ethereal Adonais falls to earth when Shelley turns to Keats's literal deathbed. In some ways, then, *Keats's Places* confirms what Keats himself said about the landscapes of his Scottish tour, a comment both O'Halloran and Alexandra Paterson cite in an effort to dispute it: people, including dead and fictional people, were what Keats liked "better than scenery" (qtd. on 192).

Meanwhile, several essays offering vivid accounts of Keats's movement through particular physical landscapes—reading Keats as one might read Wordsworth in the Lakes—either bow gracefully out of literary readings (beyond tracing Keats's reactions in letters), or spend their third quarter leaping to poetic analyses which, though excellent in their own right, seem disconnected from the geography that came before. A delightful example of the former is Richard Marggraf Turley's "Keats Underway," which trails Keats's carriage from London to the Isle of Wight in April 1817, sourcing his letters' commentary on local landmarks. An example of the latter is Nicholas Roe's "John Keats at Winchester," which reads like two astute if distinct essays, the first on Keats's activities at Winchester and familiarity with the King Alfred mythos, and the second, much shorter, on the Old English vocabulary of "Ode to Autumn." Unsurprisingly, the essays that most fluidly integrate Keats's literary writing into a geographical account of place are those on Keats's Scottish tour, which he undertook in part specifically to inspire his poetry (158). Heidi Thomson's essay on Meg Merrilies, a character in Walter Scott's *Guy Mannering* and the inspiration for Keats's ballad "Meg Merrilies," and Alexandra Paterson's on Keats and geology are standouts in this regard. Fiona Stafford's essay, which boasts the collection's best title—"Keats, Shoots and Leaves"—takes a different but equally successful tack. Stafford recovers the botanical knowledge

Keats would have gleaned as a Guy's Hospital student on trips to Hampstead Heath, then argues that Keats's botany is an index to his allusiveness: at the moments his poetry is most literally flowery, it's also the most fruitful intertextually.

If this collection is itself a garden walk, it has a few odd corners and sharp left turns. Greg Kucich's essay, on the gentle, "alternative kind of masculinity" promoted in Leigh Hunt's circle, uses "transgendered" in some uncomfortable ways, implying that anything feminine a man does "transgenders" him (66). Not quite as uncomfortable but somewhat odder is Grant F. Scott's piece, which begins as a sharp reconsideration of the poems in the 1820 *Lamia* volume; continues by reading "Ode to Psyche" as a concealed love letter to Georgiana Keats, in which the poet imagines revirginizing her in order to deflower her; and culminates in a not-quite-arch claim that *The Great Gatsby* is Keats's seventh great ode because it too features a love triangle. Both essays contain fine readings and historical spadework, but would perhaps have benefited from more rigorous editorial guidance.

The question of what constitutes scholarly rigor is asked by both *Keats's Negative Capability* and *Keats's Places*—not as a means of gatekeeping, but of pushing critical inquiry to take new and provocative shapes. In *Negative Capability*, rigor is a tributary motif that flows into wider questions about how negative capability might enable new forms of scholarship. Anne McCarthy's summary of Zen approaches to Keats encapsulates the volume's basic position on this topic: "[S]cholarly efforts that seek to understand Keats in Zen terms and, more limitedly, to understand Zen in Keatsian terms, lose in negative capability what they gain in scholarly rigor" (235). For McCarthy, "negative capability" means embracing a historiography that "operates continuously, outside of linear time" (234), and by extension, outside of linear argument. That McCarthy can so casually juxtapose it to "scholarly rigor" implies a consensus about what the latter looks like. Despite a history of challengers, argument remains a key requisite of what most literature scholars would consider "rigorous" work; the first question instructors often ask of a student's essay is, "does it have an argument?" While rigor can characterize an essay's other elements—its research, its readings—the lack of a central, guiding claim frequently disqualifies it as rigorous in general.

To its credit, the *Negative Capability* collection recognizes that Keats's term inherently calls these standards into question. Several essays champion negatively-capable modes of criticism, by which they mostly mean scholarship whose value is not measured by how well it draws a causal trajectory. Cassandra Falke does so most straightforwardly in an essay entitled "Negatively Capable Reading," which allies negative capability to phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion's idea of "negative certainty," knowledge one feels deeply but can't define (82). In her essay, McCarthy outlines an alternate "negatively capable reading practice that recognizes the discontinuity of textual circulation" and "enables us to read in and out of established historical contexts and lineages" (236). Walter L. Reed, in the volume's final essay, reaches a similar conclusion via Bakhtin. To think in negatively capable ways, he writes, "We are asked to think in terms of an expanding proliferation of contested meaning rather than a straight line of discrete semantic succession" (246). What does "rigor" look like in such proliferations? *Keats's Negative Capability* showcases a compelling set of possible answers. For example, the several essays that survey American poetry's debt to negative capability mostly do not make discrete arguments. Rather, they create topographies whose diligence lies in their insight into sometimes incommensurate moments and persons. Thomas Gardner's thoughtful meditations on Jorie Graham's poetry document Graham's contradictory efforts to "hold oneself in unspeakability" (194); Eric Eisner charts debates about negative capability between midcentury American poets but declines to declare a victor. Brian Rejack's speculations about John Jeffrey's unreliable transcription offers a more self-consciously playful example. The essay's goal seems almost affective rather than argumentative—sharing the joy of Rejack's own rigorous and sensitive archival work.

Affect seems also the goal of many essays in *Keats's Places*. In his introduction, Richard Marggraf Turley offers an incomplete list of the places in England with Keats placards. Turley calls these placards an "atlas of memorialization ... the grid references of our desire to connect Keats-the-man with physical locations" (12). He ends his introduction with a memory of his own desire to connect, reminiscing about discovering precisely which cornfield Keats visited in "To Autumn." Clearly the value of such work, for scholars and readers, is as emotional as it is critical. Nor are these terms mutually exclusive. While it may help subsequent scholars understand "To Autumn" to know which field Keats really saw, there is also something affectively powerful about touching, even by proxy, the spot where a beloved poet once sat. No single essay in *Keats's Places* makes an explicit case for this power, as writers in *Negative Capability* call for negatively capable reading. But many quietly, poignantly illustrate it. Giuseppe Albano's essay on Keats in Rome retells the familiar story of Keats's death with tenderness and grace via affective details, like how the flower motif on Keats's ceiling in his Spanish Steps bedroom may have inspired his comment that he could feel the flowers growing above him in his grave. Similarly, Kenneth Page's history of Wentworth Place revels in small details of architecture, decoration, and landscape, fleshing out a portrait of Keats among the "clothes pegs, bell handles, looking glasses, cups, saucers, decanters" (261) and other ephemera of daily life. The value of such details lies in their vivid evocation of Keats's life and death. They provoke readers' own latent "desire to connect" with Keats across the gulf of history.

What is interesting about these strolls through Keats's life is their apparent unconcern with "rigor," if rigor is defined as an essay proving itself on the pulses of Keats's poetry. Marggraf Turley's essay on Keats's carriage trip to Winchester, Page's on life at Wentworth Place, and Albano's on Keats's death in Rome all approach pure biography. A few decades ago, they might even have been critiqued as antiquarian, doing history for history's sake in the mode against which new historicists of the 1990s defined themselves. *Keats's Places* suggests how historicist scholarship has now moved beyond their anxieties. What the volume's essays are moving towards is a tougher question. A longstanding critique of such affectionate historicism is that it unwittingly reinforces a restrictive canon. For Romanticism, a field whose canonical poets are more prey to cults of personality than others, this critique is especially vital. Do essays that encourage emotional relationships with John Keats merely reify his position as a member of the Big Six? Because *Keats's Places* rarely attempts, unlike *Negative Capability*, to theorize about its own methodology, it never asks this question. In doing so, it misses an opportunity to distinguish between method and subject, to ask whether affective historicism itself is problematic, or whether it's just that such affection has been applied mostly to canonized figures like Keats. Could a similar approach promote writers who do not currently have plaques dedicated to them across England—expand the affective networks of which readers are capable? If so, the warmth of the essays in *Keats's Places* could offer a model for future scholarship, a rigorousness defined by the "desire to connect" it evokes.

The affectionate historicism in *Keats's Places* has similar consequences to *Negative Capability's* search for alternative models of scholarly rigor, in that both collections seem more defined by their explorative essays than their more traditionally-argumentative pieces. Despite never theorizing its approach, *Keats's Places* feels much more comfortable with this situation. Its leisurely essays set the volume's tone, and on the whole they are more confident, their prose livelier. *Negative Capability*, on the other hand, frets explicitly about scholarly form, and this anxiety augments its repeated topical worry about the possible meaninglessness of its central term. Where *Keats's Places* feels like it has nothing to prove, *Negative Capability* is restless and defensive. But then so, very often, was Keats. Though *Keats's Places* works hard to build affective links between the poet and his contemporary readers, it is *Negative Capability* that finally feels like the more Keatsian of the two collections: calling wry, self-conscious attention to its own shortcomings while reaching ambitiously beyond them; having something to prove and, more or less, proving it.

Reference

1. Bate, Walter Jackson. *John Keats*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1963. Print.