

‘Need keeps the book of dying open’: Negative Capability in Gil Ott’s *The Whole Note*.

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I have adopted Keats’ famous term in the title of this paper, because it feels like an answer to the conference theme of ‘Ambiguity and the Search for Meaning’. Keats’ definition of *negative capability* as: “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats 1965: 53), seems to simultaneously refuse the search for meaning whilst potentially embracing ambiguity. However, what does negative capability actually look like? I want to examine Gil Ott’s book *The Whole Note* as a way of exploring this question, as negative capability seems part of its very fabric. Ott suffered from kidney disease for most of his life, undergoing numerous failed transplant operations, and died at the age of fifty four. I wish to read *The Whole Note* as a meditation on death and dying, noting in particular how the book, through its arresting formal procedures, seems to argue for a resistance to the final closure of meaning that death metaphorically and perhaps literally presents.

Gil Ott (1950-2004) was an American poet, writer and publisher associated with the Language Poetry movement. His journal *Paper Air* (1976-1990) first published Charles Bernstein’s famous verse-essay ‘Artifice of Absorption’ and his small press Singing Horse (still extant) has published important figures such as Rae Armantrout, David Antin and Rosmarie Waldrop. He worked at The Painted Bride

Arts Centre in Philadelphia for almost twenty years – a grass roots arts and community organisation. He published thirteen books including *The Yellow Floor* (Sun & Moon, 1985), *Within Range* (Burning Deck, 1987), *Public Domain* (Potes & Poets, 1989), *The Whole Note* (Zasterle, 1996), and *Traffic* (Chax Press, 2001).

The Whole Note is a sequence of thirty-two prose poems arranged into four sections of eight poems each. The book uses experimental techniques associated with the Language Poets, such as ambiguity, discontinuity and non-standard syntax. The density of the book resists attempts to paraphrase its argument as it moves from poem to poem. By making extensive use of non-sequiturs, the inner structure of each poem also refuses easy summary or closure. However, despite this difficulty, the book does offer recurring ideas or motifs: observations of the natural world (largely drawn from California where three quarters of the poem was written); reflections on poetics; images of relationships; the details of decay, pain and illness; accounts of the rituals of other cultures; thoughts about identity; the activities of walking and breathing.

What I hope to illustrate here is the highly suggestive movement of meaning and syntax in Ott's writing. Each sentence reads like an independent entity, and although this is by no means a unique effect in the history of the prose poem, Ott's subtle handling of syntax gives an effect of an over-determined semantic territory which requires extensive re-reading in order to establish continuities and discontinuities of argument and idea. The use of ambiguity and puns, leading to an impression of a subtle, critical irony at work, and the fact that the book's themes are not overtly declared, analysed, explained or framed from the ordering perspective of a self-conscious narrator's voice, offers the reader the possibility of a heightened

engagement with the poem as language and form. As Ott wrote in the preface to his 2001 volume *Traffic*:

I have always felt that the challenge in reading poetry is equal to or greater than that of writing it. The ‘poet’ is not so much the one who composes or delivers the work, nor the one who reads and interprets, but the mutual establishment of all of these. (Ott 2001: 8)

In my engagement with Ott’s work I am made aware of the book’s artifice as integral to what it offers as argument: it proceeds as much by its attitude to form as by theme, and this makes the process of interpretation highly visible.

Ott’s statement of poetics in the preface to *Traffic* is apt for discussing his approach in *The Whole Note*. He describes *Traffic* as adhering to “no unifying theme of narrative development” (Ott 2001: 7) and links this to a view of the world in which

It would seem to be a universal human desire to believe in the face of all contravening evidence and the complexity of the present moment, in a stable world, near at hand. (Ott 2001: 8-9)

Ott’s postmodern critique here reveals his own commitment to negative capability, one that leads to a kind of radically open-ended writing that acknowledges this contingency and complexity in its structure. Several parts of *The Whole Note* are readable as self-reflexive statements of this poetics.

The statement “First to write them, then get to know the less and less form assuming” (Ott 1996: 13¹) suggests an open-ended, exploratory process of composition wherein writing is the primary act followed by getting to know what has been done, not unlike Jean-François Lyotard’s famous formulation “The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*” (Lyotard 1984: 81). Paradoxically, what is written then seems to assume form less and less, rather than more. Elsewhere the limits of writing are acknowledged in statements such as “I take time writer to sit, remove you to whom magnified parceling you out teases alterity” (Ott 1996: 23). Here Ott uses a cross-word pun where “time writer” suggests typewriter. If writing here is an act of “magnified parceling you out” – a kind of representation that magnifies and isolates aspects of a person – then the fact that it “teases alterity” suggests ambiguously both the power of writing to overcome otherness, but that it may also be simply in thrall to otherness. Ott also characterises writing as an endlessly self-reflexive process “the inventing looking for itself [...] acting out me, the author” (Ott 1996: 28) which debates the role of form as enabling or otherwise: “feeling the constraints form imposed” (Ott 1996: 33) versus “free of constraint” (Ott 1996: 39).

The Whole Note figures the activities of writing, breathing and walking as equivalent ways in which we persist, keep going and make our identities in the face of decay and death. That all these activities can in some way be thought of as different kinds of meditation, that is, attention to the present moment, fits with Ott’s insistence on the importance of the present in the preface to *Traffic*: “Past and future are essentially fictions, [...] Language, the act, is present” (Ott 2001: 9). Whilst this

¹ The text of *The Whole Note* is unpaginated. References are therefore counted from the title page.

accounts for the lack of narrative continuity in *The Whole Note*, Ott also acknowledges that his collection nevertheless does have a kind of unity:

By the natural force of the mind making whole, however, the collection [...] has found its unity, not so much in its form as in the chunk of time that it has come to occupy. (Ott 2001: 7)

Ott's sense of time as something experienced "in a multitude of ways, from the ephemeral to the immovable" with his focus on the more "solid experience of time" that "spreads and covers all of existence" (Ott 2001: 8) finds its analogue in Deleuze's account of time in Proust in his 1964 book *Proust and Signs*:

Time, ultimate interpreter, ultimate act of interpretation, has the strange power to affirm simultaneously fragments that do not constitute a whole in space, any more than they form a whole by succession within time. (Deleuze 2000: 129-130)

Deleuze recuperates the idea of multiplicity as a kind of unity, looking for a "unity of this very multiplicity [...] a whole of just these fragments" (Deleuze 2000: 163) This leads him to rewrite, or co-write with Proust, an evocation of Balzac's style, or rather *nonstyle*:

The fragments of silence and of speech, what he says and what he does not say, are distributed in a fragmentation that the whole ultimately confirms because it results from it, rather than corrects or transcends. (Deleuze 2000: 165)

This tension between a sense of wholeness and fragmentation is illuminating of Ott's poetics in *The Whole Note*, even exposing the pun on w/whole in the title – which is argued with in the poem by the statement “resistance turns a minor note” (Ott 1996: 26). Crucially for what I read as Ott's concern with mortality in *The Whole Note*, Deleuze makes an explicit link between time's capability to affirm wholes out of fragments with that of the idea of death itself:

The idea of death as uniformly imbuing all fragments, carrying them toward a universal end (Deleuze 2000: 157)

For Deleuze, the idea of death “consists of a certain effect of Time” (Deleuze 2000: 158) and its effect is less a kind of closure than of a mixing up, as dying is a process that is also carried on by the living. Deleuze argues that the idea of death “ceases to be an ‘objection’ provided we can attach it to an order of production, thus giving it its place in the work of art” (Deleuze 2000: 159). As is Proust's theme in the masked ball scene of *Finding Time Again*, it is through the decay of the human body that time, normally invisible, becomes visible. Such a poetics seems to underwrite Ott's concern with the decay of the body and the fact of dying as a means of engaging

truth. As Deleuze puts it “it is the nature of truth [...] to be produced as an effect of time” and that “loss having then passed into the work” becomes “the condition of its form” (Deleuze 2000: 160).

Proust’s use of the walks of the Méséglise Way and of the Guermantes Way as figures for this kind of unity of fragments disclosed by truth, time, and death, find their analogue in Ott’s almost central concern with walking – especially walking characterised as a painful act. Walking is life-affirming as it also reminds one of mortality, it is an act of poetics, of self-making in the face of uncertainty and the ever-present threat of loss.

The Whole Note actually begins and ends with the act of walking; the first poem ends “I walk away” and the final poem ends “I will walk away”. Walking is figured as wandering in many poems, a choice word with its pun on *wondering*, and constructed as an active “purposeful” (Ott 1996: 16) image for resistance to ageing: “find one wandering plans to interrupt decay” (Ott 1996: 10), despite it also being a source of pain: “piled on every bone felt” (Ott 1996: 40), “dark walk on leaked blood” (Ott 1996: 42). Towards the end of the first section of the book the following passage unfolds a more extended meditation:

Try my arms, the height of my hips’ measure to sap

sentences lacking subject, predicate, equilibrium, a pace implies home, identity, mine determined to undermine a diagram. Heel to ball. Forward heedless of the intrusion on purview, compromised. (Ott 1996: 11)

Here the narrator appears to be making a dis/connection between his physical integrity “try my arms [...] my hips” and that of his poem “sentences lacking subject, predicate, equilibrium”. The verb “sap” occupies an ambiguous ground in its position at the end of a paragraph break; it might mean the test of the “hips’ measure” is in the “sap” as a kind of life-force, or it could mean that the body’s state “saps” or drains the sentences of the poem. That a connection can be made between the body and the open textual strategies of the poem seems crucial and leads to the consideration that “a pace implies home, identity” as if the very act of walking guarantees a kind of personal, social integrity. That Ott’s poetics so far would lead us to treat such an end with some suspicion however is borne out subtly in the highly patterned phrase: “mine determined to undermine a diagram”. If the narrator refers to his own identity here, it may be something to value that the unconventional “measure” of his body and his writing seeks to question the normative certainties of existence in a postmodern fashion. The act of walking is again noted in a concrete image of “heel to ball”, isolated in a single short sentence. However, the immediately following sentence: “forward heedless of the intrusion on purview, compromised” seems to reiterate a postmodern critique of a forward marching that is unaware of being under surveillance and compromised. Thus Ott’s utilization of the figure of walking is multivalent in meaning and is not straightforwardly redemptive, at least not in the terms of the radical politics that Ott’s radical poetics seems to hint at.

As the book enters the end game of the final section, the tessellation of the themes of embodiment, selfhood, writing and mortality gathers in density. Ott makes

the declaration that gives this paper its title: “Need keeps the book of dying open, the language common after all”. If the idea of death, as constructed by Deleuze, uniformly imbues the fragmented texture of Ott’s book, Ott seems to articulate a need for this contingency to remain open, a sort of w-hol(e)(y) unity that resembles negative capability. That this need is articulated in terms of the book and of language seems to make the act of attaching death to an order of production – that is, as Deleuze sees in Proust, to art – a recuperative, even redemptive one. Ott, with his background in leftist politics, seems to see the implications of thinking of death as a common language as an emblem of the human commons; our universal destiny, which, in order to remain ethically open to our freedom, also remains a necessarily unknown end.

In the penultimate poem Ott seems to acknowledge this active uncertainty of living and links it again to the act of walking, whereby the word *feet* decisively becomes a pun on the word as it is used in prosody:

Dispassionate grace the water’s edge

reach to what hypothesis uncertainty led the spirit. Still, moving, speaking,
incomprehensible. Feet set in mud, decayed, and other feet

tirelessly composed. (Ott 1996: 42)

The role of uncertainty here as something that leads the spirit to hypothesize about its fate seems crucial, even if it leads to a kind of bathos in which the use of punctuation allows “still” to pun on its two senses in relation to both moving and speaking: now side by side, but incomprehensible. This seems quite like a Beckettian end game in which, although feet are set in mud, other feet, whether they be metrical or not, are tirelessly composed into being, or simply rest with energised composure. That Ott keeps the options open here, even in the face of extremity, seems to reveal a commitment to negative capability that underwrites his whole project.

In a book driven by the conjunction of death, truth and time, the last poem announces itself as “a formal end only” that “blurred with or without morphine decides to live” (Ott 1996: 43). The suggestion that if the book ends the narrator will continue, rather chillingly implies that a choice was made to go on. The narrator acknowledges:

I have made a mistake a meandering

stasis, down a notch and starting over. Someone else’s surgery pulled a knot out, left a man handled roughly

bumped and thrown what dirt brackets. (Ott 1996: 43)

Here, the act of meandering is identified as stasis, although the phrases “down a notch and starting over” imply a slowing down and a new beginning. The next sentence

contains what can be read as a rather brutal description of the surgical procedures Ott was subject to as part of his battle with kidney disease and suggests a certain bitterness about the way in which he was treated. The concluding lines of the book however suggest a resolution:

I will build a body of utterance, that fooled me. The odor will stay, and I

will walk away. (Ott 1996: 43)

That the narrator undertakes to build a “body of utterance” is a perfect figure for the link between writing and mortality articulated throughout the book, and hints at the notion of the complete works of a poet as inevitably a posthumous achievement. That the narrator adds ironically “that fooled me” suggests an ongoing resistance to closure, that even the body of utterance is not to be trusted as a completed artifact, surrendering its subject whole and intact. That Ott seeks an ongoing tension with closure is memorably encapsulated in the final statement. If odor is the odor of a dead body, then, once death comes, the narrator is already somewhere else.² In this isolated, tightly alliterative closing phrase, the word “will” sounds almost emphatic. If this signals the actual end of the book, its final image – echoing its opening – is resistant and in defiance of that closure. This resistance is its rationale in its ‘search for meaning’ in the face of death and constitutes a profound example of negative capability.

² As Irvin Yalom quotes Epicurus: “Where death is, I am not.” (Yalom 2008: 177)

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