

Angler Poetics and Positive Capability in John Thompson's *Stilt Jack*

By Rob Winger

There is no poetry of distinction without formal invention, for it is in the intimate form that works of art achieve their exact meaning....

—William Carlos Williams, “Introduction to *The Wedge*” (1944).

... several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously —I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man [sic] is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason— Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrallium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge.

—from John Keats to George and Thomas Keats (Sunday, 22 December, 1817).

Walking home from London nearly two centuries ago, John Keats suddenly realized why certain writers resonated with his sensibilities. “At once it struck me,” he famously wrote to his brothers, “what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in literature...I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man [sic] is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (902). In other words, what makes certain poems superlative, for Keats, has little to do with closed, universal declarations, but instead concerns the implicit, temporary, or unresolved. Lyric poetry, Keats implies, requires a defusing of logic, a re-visioning of the scientific method. Unlike Coleridge, with his resistance to “half knowledge,” poets must therefore leave their lyrics open, he suggests. They must plumb the depths of their respective valleys, find the darkest places, and only then raise their arms.

Such a journey—from knowing to unknowing to unknowing-as-knowing—is at the heart of maritime poet John Thompson’s well-loved second and final book, *Stilt Jack* (1978). Perhaps part of the reason is inherent in the form he helped to re-invent, the “free-verse” ghazal, an adaptation of

the original Persian/Urdu form.¹ Both the original and free-verse versions of the ghazal require a contradictory presentation of the secular and divine, popular and erudite, dark and light. By positioning his work between and amongst such binaries, Thompson takes up a liminal and liberating space that ultimately affirms a qualified faith within a supposedly secular age. Although there is no direct evidence that Thompson intentionally engages Keats' philosophy in *Stilt Jack*, nor that his interventions in the conventional Atlantic lyric are directly linked to the experimental poetics of Black Mountain or the 1960s Vancouver poetry scene, the tone of his ghazals nonetheless presents a radical poetics that is formally resonant with both Romantic and Postmodern approaches to the lyric. This allows him to employ a self-aware, self-reflexive, lyric methodology that re-invents Keatsian negative capability for the postmodern era, a strategy at the heart of Thompson's ghazal sensibility.

Part One: Positive as Negative: Re-inventing Negative Capability

To contextualize Thompson's implicit embrace of negative capability, I must clarify that Keats's actual poetry is not as important for my argument as what is now read as his central poetic theory. If Yeats' early dismissal of Keats (in "Ego Dominus Tuus") is any indication of a wider trend, the Modernists arguably read Keats as the antithesis to radical, poetic experimentation. The sort of neo-Romanticism that Keats inspires during the twentieth century, therefore, is more applicable to a line of influence that Albert Gelpi identifies as "an alternative pole to Postmodernism in the contemporary period," which arguably moves from Yeats to Wallace Stevens to Ted Hughes, than it is to the radical transformations of the Pound-Williams line, which outwardly embraces negative capability during early Modernism. Such an embrace is perhaps most clearly articulated when Charles Olson seemingly recuperates the term circa 1950.

Olson's recuperation shouldn't be read as an endorsement of Keatsian lyrics so much as a resuscitation of what was previously seen as a rather minor Romantic insight. While William Spanos (1980) points out that "[i]t has often been remarked that Keats's famous definition of 'Negative Capability' plays a significant role in Charles Olson's thinking about existence and poetry" (38), for example, one of the primary reasons Keats' concept achieves its "famous" status in twentieth-century North American poetics derives directly from Olson's re-application of the term in his own projectivist poetics, not necessarily due to some sudden, popular re-discovery of Keats. Whatever the case, I'm less interested in the *critical* discussion of negative capability that's arisen since early postmodernism than in the

term's vital incorporation into the *poetry* of writers of the postmodern lyric. To examine Thompson's implicit activation of negative capability, therefore, I've focused on his actual poetry, not on a parallel history of critique.

As Thompson himself notes, *Stilt Jack* makes "astonishing leaps" ("Ghazals," *Stilt Jack* n.p.) to harness the fundamental lack of closure that characterizes the ghazal form. Such open-endedness is perhaps succinctly expressed in a single couplet from Ghazal IX: "": "Sometimes I think the stars scrape at my door, wanting in: / I'm watching the hockey game" (IX.8).² Here, Thompson moves from a symbol for metaphysical awareness—"the stars scrape at my door"—to a pedestrian experience that's decidedly not "natural"—"watching the hockey game." This juxtaposition is not only startlingly non-narrative, but also linguistically nuanced. It combines a sense of self-critique with a sense of self-confidence, allowing Thompson's speaker to be *both* triumphant *and* foolish (rather than one or the other). Both elements are key ingredients in the postmodern lyric.

Thompson's embrace of the negative, unfinished, and contradictory in *Stilt Jack* echoes William Spanos' view of Olson, whose "appropriation" of negative capability fosters "a poetry the essential activity of which is not, as it is in the tradition, *confirmation* (the achievement of correspondence between the mind and its object from the vantage point of a certain distance) but *discovering*" (70). In re-inventing Keats' concept, after all, Thompson (implicitly) and Olson (directly) both stress process and openness rather than categorical closure. Thus, both authors actively embrace the multiple and imperfect. Rather than police her/his impulses, Olson says a poet must remain open to a poem's energy, allowing absence, multiplicity, and contradiction to co-exist within his/her verse.

Similarly, Thompson's negative capability should not be mistaken as a blind embrace of—or even direct engagement with—Keatsian philosophy, but seen as a contextualized reinvention of its central tenets. *Stilt Jack* includes not only startlingly new juxtapositions, after all, but also predictable (and sometimes clichéd) moments of sunlight and flowers, love and sexual union, landscape and weather, moments perhaps indebted to the sustained influence of Char, Hopkins, and the Romantics on Thompson's work. Thus, alongside disjuncture, contradiction, and absence, Thompson includes ghazals that proclaim closure, as in the finale of Ghazal II:

Let's agree: we are whole: the house
rises: we fight; this is love

and old acquaintance.
Let's gather our stars; our fire

will contain us; two,
one.

(II.3-5)

This celebration of love, I contend, is not a lapse into conventionality, but a careful choice. Here, the “stars” ignored in Ghazal IX will be gathered for a domestic fire that enables a closed, romantic union. Agreement, wholeness, love, and containment are the central dynamics of these lines, not disjuncture, contradiction, and paradox. At such moments, which are scattered throughout *Stilt Jack*, Thompson exploits not only counteractive and rebellious negativity, but also affirms and includes what might initially be called *positive* capability: an ability to embrace single answers as definitive, despite the obvious existence of reasonable exceptions to such absolutes, especially within the postmodern milieu of (seemingly standard) doubt fundamental to the development of contemporary poetics. Thus, Thompson’s speaker not only embraces multiplicity, but also makes affirmative pronouncements such as “The drunk and the crazy live for ever, / lovers die” (XV.6). He embraces not only “negative” contradiction and process, but also “positive” confirmation and closure. In other words, this seems to be a radical gesture disguised as a conventional lyric.

In the postmodern era of ontological doubt, such a gesture ultimately involves not only a resistance to absolute answers, but also a resistance to such a resistance. In postmodern writing, after all, the refusal to accept absolutes, the avoidance of universalisms, or the cautious qualification of one’s subjectivity is standard fare – and for good reason. In fact, the positing of a universal truth is often a mark of naiveté in contemporary writing. By inflexibly resisting truisms, however, postmodern writers routinely end up reifying and neutralizing any potentially revolutionary properties they might hope to forward in their own work, accidentally strengthening a new, monological model that insists on the incomplete, the unsure, the archaeological, and the failed just as much as a predominantly pre-Modern modality sometimes insisted on a unified, reasonable, scientific whole that Postmodern purists rightly find despairingly narrow. Since universalism is so fundamentally out of fashion in the twentieth-century avant-garde, it’s perhaps not immediately apparent, therefore, that Thompson’s use of it may be a *part of* rather than counter to negative capability.

In *The Special View of History* (1970)—the second epigraph of which comes from Keats’ *Letter*—Olson argues that the “positive” relates abso-

lutely to power (politically, subjectively, rationally, formally) while the “negative” connotes enlightenment. But these are slippery terms. As a lyric poet, Thompson not only has a Romantic yearning for what Olson calls the “self as ego and sublime” (45), but also postulates “the self as center and circumference” (Olson 45), a view that resonates with Modernist treatments of poems as naturally a *part of* rather than superior to or divorced from a wider world. In *Stilt Jack*, Thompson transfers energy from an existent (but not necessarily exterior) world into and through the poem rather than overpowering such energy within a rigid formality. In other words, the poems in *Stilt Jack* seem to be *part of* the world, not products of it. This is an old, Romantic notion: that poems are alive; that they are more found than made; that the Muse controls the Poet, et cetera. But the ghazal format prevents Thompson from falling too far down this Romantic rabbit hole; these are poems that require fundamental disjuncture, lack of closure, simultaneously divine and secular address, and implicit rather than declarative meaning. In short, in *Stilt Jack*, the language might be “positive,” but the form, by definition, is “negative.”

This ultimately allows Thompson’s ghazals to operate beyond their own anti-logical trappings, and herein lies the magic of the book for so many of its readers: Thompson’s familiar lyric musicality offers us what Adrienne Rich first desired, too: “A Change of World” that equally engages both traditional insights and a new lyricism. In this sense, Thompson’s ghazals effectively continue a tradition of formalistic innovation, invoking and then destabilizing Western expectations of unity *without* an absolute rejection of the subjective lyric as a valuable, positive way of working.

Part Two: Trout, Dirt, and Summits: Thompson’s “Angler” Poetics

To situate what I’m calling his “positive capability,” I posit Thompson’s approach as an “angler poetics,” an idea most easily understood via three imagistic networks present throughout *Stilt Jack*: hooks, gardens, and mountains. For each, Thompson plays the active role of intermediary between poem and phenomenal world, self-reflexively examining subjectivity as a symbolic hunter-angler, gardener, and mountaineer.

Hooks and Lines

In Thompson’s ghazals, hooks not only denote the author’s admitted love of fishing, but also refer self-reflexively to his poetic approach. Combined with “[i]mages of iron, of metal and cutting edges, [which] occur again and

again” (Atwood 311), Thompson’s prevalent use of the hook articulates a self-awareness not only central to his continuation of the Urdu ghazal’s imagistic traditions, but also consistent with the self-reflexive poetics common in postmodern poetry.

Thompson’s use of hooks is perhaps best illustrated in Ghazal XXI, which operates around a central comparison of a poem to a fish hook:

I know how small a poem can be:
the point on a fish hook;

women have one word or too many:
I watch the wind;

I’d like a kestrel’s eye and know
how to hang on one thread of sky;

the sun burns up my book:
it must all be lies;

I’d rather be quiet, let the sun
and the animals do their work.

I might watch, might turn my back,
be a done beer can shining stupidly.

Let it be: the honed barb drowsing in iron water
will raise the great fish I’ll ride

(dream upon dream, still the sun warms my ink
and the flies buzzing to life in my window)

to that heaven (absurd) sharp fish hook,
small poem, small offering.

Here, Thompson refers to his poem as a “small offering,” captured by letting “the honed barb” of his poetics snag poetic insight from the “iron water” of experience. The process of his poetic construction therefore becomes central to his poetic content. But the rhyme between “a kestrel’s eye,” “sky,” and “lies” in couplets three and four accentuate that the poem is *not* pure experience. By privileging nature and the animal world—“I’d like a kestrel’s eye”—over the poem—which “must all be lies”—Thompson acknowledges his poetic practice as imperfect and unnatural in com-

parison to how “the sun / and the animals do *their* work” (my emphasis). The results of poetic observation are therefore compared to being “a done beer can shining stupidly” rather than sentimentally lauded as superhuman. But this does not stop Thompson’s “work” of creating a poem. His acceptance of imperfection is a positive embrace of negative capability that not only admits the limitations of poetry, but also *stresses* such limitations as essential. Thus, in catching “the great fish I’ll ride,” Thompson achieves a “small poem, small offering” that confirms his first couplet’s conceit that a poem can be as “small” as “the point on a fish hook” rather than a grand pronouncement. Such smallness, of course, is paradoxical, since the poem’s success is simultaneously of utmost importance. While the poem that results from admitting contradiction, imperfection, and disjuncture is ultimately “small,” therefore, it’s also a type of “heaven” that allows Thompson to record the process of his poem without the urgent need to resolve its imperfections or declare control over nature. Rather than demanding domination of his materials, his speaker “might watch, might turn my back,” an open-ended embrace of the lyric impulse that affirms both the “positive” power of the poem and the “negative” or “absurd” contradictions of its imperfections. I therefore agree with Peter Sanger, an authority on Thompson, who claims that this ghazal “begins the more overt development of the symbolic meaning of fish and fishing in *Stilt Jack*” (*SeaRun* 26), which slowly accretes with references to fish in Ghazals I, III, XII, XVII, and XIX.

That Thompson was an avid outdoorsman also illuminates the multiplicity of his fishing images in Ghazal XXI: they connote both tangible and metaphorical meanings, drawing on literary sources both within the mainstream Western canon and beyond it. The most important of these is probably Isaak Walton’s *The Compleat Angler* (1651), which includes the following observation: “*Angling is somewhat like Poetry, men are to be born so: I mean, with inclinations to it, though both may be heightened by practice and experience*” (qtd. in Sanger, *SeaRun* 27).³ In other words, the solitary, silent, and potentially deadly actions of a fisher are equivalent to those of a poet engaging a considered exploration of consciousness. In these respects, “Thompson also saw *The Compleat Angler* generally as a parallel to his own intentions in *Stilt Jack*,” since “Angling in Walton’s *The Compleat Angler* (note his completeness) is both ‘action’ and ‘contemplation’, just as fishing, poetry, and finding *le mot juste* attempt to be in *Stilt Jack*” (*SeaRun* 27, 28). That is, both fishing and Thompson’s poetry involve casting lines and hooking life as it flows by rather than trying to simulate it with staged constructions.

The notion of poet-as-fisher is originally stressed in Thompson's first draft for his first ghazal, wherein his speaker self-identifies as "(assassin, poet)" (*Black Book*). Here, Thompson's likening of both writing poetry and fishing to types of assassination lends credence to his definition of the ghazal as a series of "astonishing leaps." Both actions—catching a real fish and landing a poetic leap—need lines to be skimmed correctly across the surface, set to the right depths, and reeled in at exactly the proper moment. Thus, "how small a poem can be" depends upon striking the right balance between letting out too much line (and thereby exposing one's intentions) and casting far enough out to make a catch possible. When Thompson claims, in Ghazal XXII, that "I'm just a man who goes fishing" (XXII.1), therefore, he does not confess to an insignificant hobby, but underwrites the complex significance of fishing in his poetics. When he says, with assurance, that "We'll fish tommy cod: that's enough;/ come April I know where I'll go" (XII.3), he expresses a faith that grows out of placing himself within the suitable mental, spiritual, and literary contexts—via the ghazal form—for receiving and interpreting poetic impulses. Thus, Thompson's use of the fishing hook communicates both an individual translation of the natural world and a self-reflexive comment on the nature of that translation. His angler poetics depend on both.

My view of Thompson's poetics as a positive version of negative capability is also evident in the remaining, overt appearances of hooks in *Stilt Jack*:

On the hook, big trout lie like stone:
terror, and they fiercely whip their heads, unmoved.
(I.2)

All night the moon is a lamp on a post;
things move from hooks to beautiful bodies. Drunk.
(XIV.1)

myself, a fish hook tinged with blood,
a turned furrow . . .
(XIX.4)

Dark April, black water, cold wind,
cold blood on a hook.
(XXII.2)

Sweetness and lies: the hook, grey deadly bait,
a wind and water to kill cedar, idle men, the innocent.
(XXXVII.5)

Each of these examples not only details a hook that's cold, bloody, and deadly, but also symbolizes the movement from one realm of symbolic meaning to another. In each instance, the hook transforms the objects it pierces, so that "trout" becomes "stone," "things" become "beautiful bodies," "myself" becomes a ploughed field, "April" becomes "cold blood," and "Sweetness and lies" becomes deadly nourishment.⁴ In each case, a living body is related to an abstract description, and a hook makes possible the movement between specific references and more universal meditations. Thus, angling with the hook is suggestive of change or, in some instances, catharsis, and its appearance marks the importance in *Stilt Jack* of exploring not only one aspect of a given concept, but also its inverse and (cor)relative meanings. Such transformations suggest the process of preparation, inspiration, recording, and refinement essential to writing ghazals, which translate an interior poetic impulse into exterior, textual realities. Because impulsive, the nature of such translation is unstable and contradictory. Rather than creating traditional unity, Thompson's hook images therefore point out the instability of both subjective experience and closed, lyric unity, utilizing the ghazal's disjuncture to enable a positive poetics of negative capability across the temporal arc of *Stilt Jack*.

"the wildflowers grow anyway": Gardens

Thompson's embrace of multiplicity in *Stilt Jack* is also evident in another imagistic network that relates domestic action to wilderness: the garden. Alongside images of fire, which do similar work, Thompson's garden imagery expresses the possibility that civilization and cultivation can run wild, echoing the ghazal form's central tension between impulsive leaps and cultivated formality. By co-presenting domestic flowers, which symbolize the ghazal's formality, and weeds or wilderness, which symbolize poetic impulse, Thompson also deepens his angler poetics. Because a garden must be plotted and maintained by human interaction with the wild, his garden images posit poetry as a constantly failing attempt to control natural energy, thereby revealing the garden of Thompson's poetry as ultimately imperfect and constructed rather than absolute and natural. Since Thompson employs a poetics of capability, this is not a problem, but part of the solution. By treating his poems as failed gardens, overrun with wildflowers, suddenly invaded by weeds, Thompson-as-gardener disallows the

concept of a poem as utterly controlled, embracing impulse and process as central to writing. Thus, by allowing wilderness and domesticity to contaminate one another, Thompson ultimately exposes the idea of poetic control as an idealist Utopia, an impossible Eden.

Perhaps the best demonstration of how Thompson's garden imagery balances the symbolic realms of domesticity and wilderness is offered in Ghazal XXVII:

You have forgotten your garden (she said)
how can you write poems?

That things go round and again go round
In the middle of the journey...

Folly:
the wildflowers grow anyway.

I wait for a word, or the moon, or whatever,
an onion, a rhythm.

All the rivers look for me,
find me, find me.

The small stone in my hand weighs years:
it is dark.

To turn, and remember, that
is the fruit.

Despite it being "Folly" to grow a garden because "the wildflowers grow anyway," the implication is that the garden should still be maintained. This illogical commitment represents Thompson's poetics in many respects. It's folly to assume perfect control or absolute answers, but Thompson writes "anyway." The question that opens the poem is therefore ironic. If the garden represents a logical maintenance of poetic control that must vigilantly disallow ugly weeds or conflicting truths, then the reason Thompson is able to write ghazals is precisely *because* he has "forgotten [his] garden." Thompson's goal, after all, is to exist "in the middle of the journey" of his lines. Thus, he equally allows "a word, or the moon, or whatever" to enter his couplets, and co-presents, in such couplets, "an onion, a rhythm." As a gardener or angler (both figures for the poet), therefore, he's not trying to colonize the natural world (the poem or the world that inspires

it), but to exist within it. In this sense, “the fruit” of Thompson’s poetic innovation (the free-verse ghazal) is enabled by an ability “[t]o turn, and remember.” In other words, his “turn” away from lyric preconceptions—closure, singular proclamation, novelty—is empowered by a simultaneous willingness to “remember” the value of poetic precedents. Perhaps that’s why this ghazal—and many others in *Stilt Jack*—is laced with literary intertexts.⁵ Such sampling allows *Stilt Jack* to grow a new kind of garden wherein new wildflowers and old flowerbeds co-exist, simultaneously reaching up towards the old sunlight of a new poetics and growing new roots down into a tangle of artistic histories.

This mixture of old and new allows Thompson to celebrate contradiction rather than seeking the kind of “brief lyric unity” (“Ghazals” n.pag.) he’s writing against in *Stilt Jack*. His garden is dark and light, terrestrial and celestial, natural and constructed. But the garden is also made, not simply found, and shaped by one head gardener—Thompson—who must strategically deadhead his impulses in order to prevent absolute wilderness in his poetry. This dynamic is perhaps best expressed in Ghazal X:

A pineapple tree has grown in this kitchen
two years, on well water. Right here,

a man went to set a fire in the stove
and the blaze froze on the match.

Those winds: in summer turn the head rancid, in winter
drive a cold nail through the heart down to the hardwood floor.

Daisies, paintbrush, bellflower, mustard, swamp iris;
hackmatack, crowns driven northeast: they’re there.

Pigs fattened on boiled potatoes; horses mooning in hay;
in the woodshed he blew his head off with a shotgun.

Here, Thompson stages a contest between domestic comfort and the natural world that surrounds it. For my purposes, such domesticity symbolizes a poetics of closed control, while wilderness represents a corollary poetics of impulsive release. Thus, the “pineapple tree” that grows “in this kitchen / two years, on well water,” represents absolute poetic control (since pineapples are impossible to grow naturally in the Canadian wilderness), while the fourth couplet’s list of maritime wildflowers—“[d]aisies, paintbrush, bellflower, mustard, swamp iris; / hackmatack”—represents an utter sur-

render to poetic impulse. These groupings are clearly antagonistic since the pineapple is “Right here” in the domestic safety of the house, while the wildflowers are “there” in the overrun garden or field. Between the safely domesticated pineapple (i.e., poetic control) and the proliferation of wildflowers in the garden (i.e., a lyric impulse run wild) Thompson stages two failures. First, the “stove,” a symbol of domestic safety, cannot be lit by the “man who went to set a fire” because “the blaze froze.” Second, natural wind invades the intellect and the house, “turning the head rancid” and driving “a cold nail through the heart.” If the house represents control and the wind and wildflowers represent chaos, Thompson is staging the central choice of his angler poetics, here: controlled closure versus impulsive inclusivity. But his final couplet suggests that *both* options are limiting. Juxtaposing the calm domestication of “[p]igs fattened on boiled potatoes; horses mooning in hay” and the terrifying suicide of his final line, Thompson suggests the danger of fully embracing any absolute poetics.

Rather than choosing between control and impulse, *Stilt Jack*’s use of angler poetics allows for a balance between them. It’s therefore appropriate that the man’s suicide takes place “in the woodshed,” a structure built to house items harvested from the natural world, but meant to heat (and therefore empower and prolong) the domestic or constructed one. In this poem, the capacity for one’s survival within both domestic and wild space depends upon balancing these worlds. That the man who “blew his head off” uses “a shotgun” is therefore significant. Here, a domestic tool meant to tame the wilderness (via hunting) is used to annihilate domestic safety. The shotgun, then, serves as a symbolic shorthand for Thompson’s entire project since, to succeed, it must balance the ghazal’s (domestic) formalism against the (wild) impulses of radical inclusivity, a process also crucial in another imagistic network in *Stilt Jack*: mountains.

The Relative Heights of Abraham: Mountains

In *Stilt Jack*, there are at least three kinds of mountains: actual, perspectival, and limiting/illusory. Because “Thompson was an experienced, enthusiastic rockclimber and mountaineer” (Sanger, *SeaRun* 38), his references to mountains also go beyond standard apostrophes regarding sublime heights or the “spiritual journey...implied by the naming of mountains” (Sanger, *SeaRun* 38-9); they connote an active, subjective journey from a previous poetic model to an experiential embrace of the ghazal sensibility.

Thompson's arrival at the summit of his poetic breakthroughs is not easy; it necessitates journeys through valleys of creative and personal darkness. This combination of valleys and peaks is perhaps most thoroughly treated in Ghazal XXXIV, a poem guided by naming actual mountains and mountaineering equipment:⁶

I surrender to poetry, sleep
with the cinders of Apollo.

Belay to words:
Stubai, Kernmantel, Bonnaiti,

Karrimor, K.2., Nanga Parbat,
Jumar, Eiger, Choinard, Vasque.

Annapurna. The mountain wakens:
a closing hand.

Love lies with snow, passion
in the blue crevasse. Grief on summits.

Let me climb: I don't know to what:
north face, south face?

Maybe the roping down,
the last abseil.

The proper names in couplets two, three, and four all refer to mountaineering companies or Himalayan/Swiss mountain ranges and peaks (see Sanger, *Collected* 267). But the remaining couplets counter such specificity with self-reflexive comments on the contradictions of the poetic act as a “[b]elay to words.” In couplet five, Thompson finds “Grief on summits” rather than joy or triumph, symbolizing the descent into difficult psychological terrain required for his ascent to a new poetic model in *Stilt Jack*. This paradox is perhaps why Thompson's speaker asks permission to “climb” up, in couplet six, only in order to start “roping down / the last abseil,” why “The mountain wakens” as “a closing hand” (a reference to Blake; *SeaRun* 39), or why “[love] lies with snow” rather than via predictable images of roses or sunshine.

Implicit in these contradictions is the fact that finding a new model (ascending the mountain) is a fleeting accomplishment, since if one summits, one must also climb down. Such a realization marks Thompson's

new angler poetics as foundationally contradictory. The central question is not how to ascend or descend, after all, but how to manage the paradox of arrival or departure, a concern symbolized by the speaker's "surrender to poetry" via "the cinders of Apollo," the Greek god of poetry, in couplet one. Thompson's "surrender to poetry" is also a surrender of ego and control within which what ultimately matters is the act of arrival, not any pre-determined destination. Thus, when his speaker asks the reader to "Let me climb: I don't know to what," Thompson marks a breakthrough from a previous reliance on lyric closure (in his first book) to a poetics of capability in *Stilt Jack*. Like his roles as angler (with fishing hooks) and gardener (of wildflowers), Thompson's active role as mountain climber is therefore a central symbol for his writing process.

This role is stressed in Thompson's third epigraph for *Stilt Jack*, which also closes Ghazal XXXIII; I read it as a primary example of perspectival mountains in *Stilt Jack*: "I have only to lift my eyes to see / the Heights of Abraham" (XXXIII.6). A "conflation" of Psalm 121 and a letter by Emily Dickinson (Sanger, *SeaRun* 8), this line plays a crucial role in defining Thompson's mountains as subjective experiences. While the mountain is "a symbolic spiritual axis" (Sanger, *SeaRun* 8) in *Stilt Jack*, in Ghazal XXXIV Thompson does not climb the mountain; he *sees* it. Thus, his mountaineering images are comments on the difficulty of poetic and subjective perspective. If negative capability represents a method for breaking through Thompson's previous devotion to lyric closure, this mountain image articulates such a breakthrough. Thompson does not need physical strength to enact a new poetic modality, but only to "lift [his] eyes" and adjust his vision.

It is therefore productive to note that Thompson's "Heights" are not simply metaphorical; they're also subjective and possibly remembered ones. As detailed on their tourism website, the "Heights of Abraham" are a tourist attraction in Derbyshire, near Thompson's place of birth and childhood, named after Québec's "Plains of Abraham" ("The Heights"), a connection that would not have been lost on Thompson. Mined by the Romans, and established as a major tourist site in the mid-nineteenth century, the Heights offer visitors not only broad perspectives of the surrounding land, but also visits to caves (publicly toured as long ago as 1810) and to spa waters harnessed during the Napoleonic Wars ("The Heights"). The Heights' mixture of caves (dark) and summits (light) echoes Thompson's inclusive negotiation of extremes in *Stilt Jack*. But since this site possibly exists within Thompson's *memory*, his speaker's lifting of "eyes" in Ghazal XXXIII involves imaginative construction. Thus, the Heights are

included to comment not only on poetic perspective, but also on the importance of acknowledging one's subjective experiences within the confines of one's poetics.

While the "Heights" represent the possibility to break into difficult, new truths via subjective exploration, Ghazal XI's mention of "White Salt Mountain" symbolizes a warning against subsequently assuming absolute answers: "Last night I died: a tired flie woke me. / On White Salt Mountain I heard a phrase carving the world" (XI.6). That Thompson's speaker "died" is significant, because it marks a complex rebirth with the next line. Awoken by "a tired flie" (that references Emily Dickinson's "*I heard a Fly buzz – when I died*" [qtd. in Sanger, *SeaRun* 19]), Thompson's speaker now stands atop "White Salt Mountain," a legend from Taoist myth, wherein a maritime island eventually reveals itself as a mirage when approached by desperate sailors. Because literally standing on a mirage is impossible, Thompson's emplacement on White Salt Mountain signals his fruitless effort to "tell the truth" using lyric closure, a fact represented in *Stilt Jack* by both "salt" ("*a symbol of eternity*" according to Yeats; qtd. in *SeaRun*, 25) and the "white" elements of the mountain (symbols of purity) (*SeaRun* 47-8). But standing on a mountain of illusion also symbolizes the inherent limitations of any poetic method. Thompson therefore admits, on White Salt Mountain, that part of what's central in his embrace of negative capability is a recognition of his failings. Thus, his speaker's ability to "hear a phrase carving the world," a symbol for poetic insight, depends on a balance between disjuncture, multiplicity, and inclusiveness, and a realization that his ghazals are essentially imperfect and inconclusive. In the end, what's most important is not Thompson's arrival at an actually elevated poetic achievement, but his awareness that such an arrival is always limited by one's subjective and poetic limitations, an awareness signalled by the active nature of all of Thompson's various "angler" roles in *Stilt Jack*: fisher, hunter, gardener, mountain-climber, poet.

Part Three: "Give up words" (III.3): The Centrality of Self-Doubt

Although critics often parallel the self-doubt of *Stilt Jack* with Thompson's ill health and private struggles during its composition, Thompson's self-reflexivity does not merely reflect biographical hardship.⁷ In his ghazals, Thompson meditates on the basic *idea* of hardship, extending his personal example to similar struggles in literary history. Such a strategy is surely the result of a *considered* entrance into mystery rather than an unfortunate or Romantic naiveté or self-indulgence. Thompson's self-doubt and self-reflexivity might be seen, therefore, as fundamental manifestations of his

re-invention of negative capability, wherein the potential failure of his poems is central to their content. Rather than focusing on simplistic resolutions (which he calls “the muck of endings” [XXX.4]), Thompson simultaneously admits the limitations of language and affirms the vital importance of linguistic communication, despite its imperfections. Because words are a central symbol for his fraught self-reflexivity in *Stilt Jack*, Thompson’s battle with language is therefore an important part of his exploration of contemporary subjectivity.

Perhaps the most obvious articulation of “words” as a self-reflexive application of negative capability appears at the end of Ghazal XXVI:

there are ways, and signs: the woods
point one way,

the words: there is a word:
there are words, lie about us,

dogs and the night and children
poured out in looseness

and children
on the grassy ground.

(XXVI.4-7)

Here, words “lie,” never truly capturing the signified as “signs.” But they also “lie about us,” a phrase that signals both misperception—the words telling lies “about us”—and presence, with language physically scattered about “us” as readers, “poured out in [the] looseness” of the ghazal form. By utilizing assonance to draw attention to a choice between “words” and “woods,” Thompson highlights a vital relationship between the “real world” and his imagined poem. And by drawing attention, via repetition, to “the words: there is a word: / there are words,” Thompson highlights the process of diction necessary for creating a poem out of the phenomenal world. All of the words here—“dogs and the night and children”—are therefore lexical choices for the poem, but also signifiers for actual “dogs,” “night,” and “children” that exist beyond the text. While the first use of “children” is a literary choice, therefore, Thompson’s final couplet implies a phenomenological record of the actual world: “children / on the grassy ground.” This highlights Thompson’s intermediary role as a writer who actively translates the organic world into his ghazals. Thus, the ghazal’s “words” admit the fact that Thompson orders and understands the world

only from his specific, subjective perspective. That they are “poured out in looseness” perhaps represents a dual possibility: that Thompson might achieve an exacting type of open or “loose” line (that succeeds), or that he might expose an undisciplined or “loose” craft (that fails). In other words, Thompson actively accepts that failure and success are equally possible here.

Since he remains dedicated to his poetry despite its possible failure, Thompson therefore implies that we can only rely on words if we admit and embrace their limits. This implication is perhaps best expressed in Ghazal XXIII:

Put two words together: likely
it's your name.

I don't know mine:
the words have taken it, or someone's hand.

I dream myself into being,
a poor man.

...

I don't hear your words: I hear the wind,
my dreams, disasters, my own strange name.
(XXIII.6-8, 12)

Here, words both succeed and fail. The “two” words Thompson has his speaker put “together” are “likely” his name, but ultimately he does not confirm this, saying “I don't know mine” since the poems or “the words have taken it.” To proceed, Thompson must dream meaning; but such dreams, he realizes, are impoverished. He does not “hear your words,” therefore, or the poem itself, as some transcendental signifier for “the wind, / my dreams, disasters, my own strange name.” Instead, Thompson expresses a failure of system and language rooted not only in existential philosophy, but also in postmodern critiques of subjectivity.

Part of Thompson's problem relates to what Robert Kroetsch identifies as a general challenge for poets writing in 1970s Canada: how to honour a “disbelief in system—that is, to recognize and explore our distrust of system, of grid, of monisms, of cosmologies perhaps, certainly of inherited story—and at the same time write a long work that has some kind of (under erasure) unity” (“For Play” 62). Thompson's challenge, then, is to present

a united idea while also admitting that unity is a sham, using a flawed system of language to transcend the failure of systemic language. In doing so, Thompson perhaps presents something new: a concept of disunity that relies on the free-verse ghazal form to clarify its inclusiveness. This is not an easy task, and its difficulty sometimes results in precise expressions of an inability to capture either the sublime or poetic eloquence. Thus, “Thompson’s ‘words, goddamit, words’ in Ghazal VIII are condemnation and emanation of a lexical fatality in English, a cultural obtuseness, an imaginative defect. And the condemnation and damnation echo through *Stilt Jack* whenever ‘word’ or ‘words’ are used” (Sanger, “Night Sea Journey” 81). As both gift and curse, “words” anchor Thompson’s lyric impulse and formal disjuncture by exposing language as a failed, yet necessary system for subjective expression.

For my purposes, the best examples of such self-reflexivity are the two final ghazals in *Stilt Jack*. But some precedence for these is established in Ghazal XIV:

All night the moon is a lamp on a post;
things move from hooks to beautiful bodies. Drunk.

I think I hear the sound of my own grief:
I’m wrong: just someone playing a piano; just.

Bread of heaven.
In close.

In dark rooms I lose the sun:
what do I find?

Poetry: desire that remains desire. Love?
The poet: a cinder never quite burned out.

(XIV.1-5)

Leaving aside Thompson’s exquisite references to the moon, his own alcoholism, the transformative power of Romantic imagination, and the Eucharist of couplet three, what remains obvious in this ghazal is a complex self-reflexivity. Thompson invites our lyric expectations with statements of grief (that reference Rich and Ghalib), but then upsets them by claiming error (“I’m wrong: just someone playing the piano”) at once legitimizing his self-analysis and undermining a lyric expectation for holistic completion. In the “dark rooms” of the ghazals, the lyric’s unified and logical “sun” is therefore lost, strategically, in order to “find” something new.

Despite the central limits of language, Thompson therefore retains his faith in the poetic imagination, obliquely quoting lines from Char's "Partage Formel" in the ghazal's last couplet to claim, for poetry, longevity, resonance, and continuance.⁸ Poetry, he says, is "desire that remains desire," something that embraces process rather than resolution. Thus, a poet is not a captured flame, but instead, a dying star, "a cinder never quite burned out." These two lines essentially summarize Thompson's adaptation of negative capability: poetic investigation does not end in answers; it remains, endures, continues, and still burns long after books are closed and pens are capped.

The final two ghazals in *Stilt Jack* perhaps articulate these complexities best. Ghazal XXXVII begins by returning to the first couplet in the book: "Now you have burned your books: you'll go / with nothing but your blind, stupefied heart" (I.1). In this penultimate poem, however, we're told that "Now you have burned your books, you'll go with nothing. / A heart," meaning that blindness and stupefaction have been replaced by a faith in impulse and intuition. What's been rejected, in short, is the idea that we must find final answers rather than remaining, as Keats put it, "content with half knowledge." Thus, Thompson's "folly of tongues" (XXXVII.3) is admitted in the poems, an implicit indictment of nostalgic neo-Romanticism.

But Thompson also realizes that he must work *within* the canon rather than completely rejecting it. This is why he says of Flaubert's "*le mot juste*" that he must "forget it; remember" (XXXVII.8). His invocation of Flaubert's self-prescriptive phrase indicates both a shared obsession over finding the right words and an attempt to remain open to the intuitive impulses of the ghazal sensibility. By both forgetting and remembering the Western canon, Thompson attempts to balance a healthy usage of its insights with his breakthrough into a new kind of writing:

(the grand joke: *le mot juste*:
forget it; remember):

Waking is all: readiness:
you are watching;

I'll learn by going:
Sleave-silk flies; the kindly ones.
(XXXVII.8-10)⁹

What's perhaps most important in these couplets is an open sense of "readiness." Thompson insists that in addition to the prescriptions of older models of art, after all, what's central now is process, self-awareness, and a willingness to "learn by going."

It's not until we reach the final couplets of *Stilt Jack*, however, that Thompson offers his most thorough summary of the importance of self-reflexivity for his project:

Should it be passion or grief?
What do I know?

My friend gives me heat and a crazy mind.
I like those (and him).

Will it all come back to me?
Or just leave.

I swing a silver cross and a bear's tooth
in the wind (other friends, lovers, grieving and passionate).

I've looked long at shingles.
They've told.

I'm still here like the sky
and the stove.

Can't believe it, knowing nothing.
Friends: these words for you.

(XXXVIII.1-7)

This ghazal articulates the kind of open-ended poetics central to many postmodern projects. The unresolved "passion or grief" that opens the poem, for instance, becomes "grieving and passionate" by mid-poem, stressing process over finality. This activation matches the text's final invitation into a private communion, wherein Thompson names his readers as "friends" and offers them his final "words." By admitting in couplet one that he doesn't "know" the answers, or, in couplet three, that he's unsure what will ultimately happen next, however, Thompson also offers us a new ideal: he equates reader participation with his own supposed authority. Both parties—reader and writer—are essential here. Thompson stresses this by saying he "Can't believe it, knowing nothing," expressing not only a lack of surety but also a profound insight (since he either understands the

idea of nothingness, here, or simply doesn't know anything). In the end, openly admitting that words fail to capture the sublime becomes a new method for achieving a qualified sublimity. This is the implicit, communal message of *Stilt Jack's* negative capability: we are equal participants in our lack of knowledge, a lack that deserves suitable, sustained celebration.

• • •

While one might aptly read Thompson's ghazals as examples "of the careful melding of two worlds: the wilderness [Thompson] loved and interacted with and the private world of the poet, the drive of the spirit toward illumination" (Cooper, "Way Back" 39), one must also remember that *Stilt Jack* might not be aiming for a final resolution between such antithetical worlds. Instead, "Thompson is clearly seeking a polyphony of voices" that the ghazal form, by its own requirements and traditions, "invites" (Barbour 106). To re-invent negative capability, even if he does so implicitly or accidentally, Thompson neither ignores the breakthroughs of Modernism nor so fundamentally endorses them that the previous insights of the Romantics and Victorians are dismissed absolutely. Instead, *Stilt Jack* forges a neo-Romantic model while also continuing the project of modernity. Largely unlike his lyric contemporaries, *Stilt Jack* is therefore both traditional *and* experimental, a balance not commonly found in the traditional Maritime poetry of 1960s and 1970s Canada, and certainly not representative of a wider trend in the region. To understand his angler poetics contextually, we must therefore re-read Keats' Romantic vision through Olson's Modern projections, so that Thompson's lyrical postmodernity is revealed as an exceptional, non-progressive synchronicity, wherein one subjectivity is made up of a variety of poetic lineages. In his ghazals, Thompson demonstrates that chaos and order are not ruled by entropy, divinity, or subjective insight, but by the gaps between such labels. Thus, *Stilt Jack* operates somewhere amongst categories. By the time we reach Ghazal XXXVIII, we're forced to realize that Thompson is "still here like the sky / and the stove" (XXXVIII.6), not just between, among, or above his readers, but *within* and fundamentally participatory in our mutual reception of the text. It's not about choosing between geographies, but travelling within them: grounded and in flight, historical and contemporary, affirmative and negative, present and gone.

A considered openness is therefore an essential part of *Stilt Jack*, enacted each time readers open Thompson's posthumous sequence to its opening lines: "Now you have burned your books, you'll go / with nothing

...” (I.1). This nothingness is not empty, but full of potential, less a *tabula rasa* than a palimpsest, wherein traces of experience—from Thompson, his literary ancestors, and ourselves—enable various literary histories, voices, and modalities to mingle, overlap, contradict one another, and, at certain moments, harmonize.

Maybe this is what Thompson meant, in the brief scrawl of pencil he left on a pack of King Size Belvederes, in 1974, that has since found its way into his fonds at the National Library and Archives in Ottawa. Turn the package inside out, and we find an invitation to join the implicit impulses of Thompson’s angler poetics, put into two lines, quick, marking his journey through the ghazals not only as intensely private, but also as fundamentally communal:

the user is the
content of the poems.
(*Loose Leaf*)

Reading this, what’s clear, to me at least, is that the re-invention of negative capability Thompson begins late in his life remains, for us, contemporary and present, activated whenever we cast a cold eye into *Stilt Jack*’s spare yet sumptuous streams.

Notes

- 1 For more on the evolution of the ghazal form in 1960s-70s North America, see my 2009 essay, “A Brief History of the Canadian Ghazal.”
- 2 Since there are several published versions of *Stilt Jack*, I’ve cited it according to poem and couplet number rather than citing conventional line or page numbers. Thus, this one, the eighth couplet in Ghazal nine, is cited thus: IX.8
- 3 Sanger also traces references to Walton in ghazals XXI, XXIII, XXVIII, XXXIII, and XXXVII (*SeaRun* 27).
- 4 This is a veiled reference to Matthew Arnold’s “Sweetness and light” in *Culture and Anarchy*. See Sanger’s *SeaRun* (21-2).
- 5 These include Stevens’ “The Pleasures of Merely Circulating,” Dante’s *Inferno*, Wordsworth’s sonnet on the death of his daughter, Rilke’s *The Sonnets of Orpheus*, and others. See *SeaRun* (30-31).
- 6 Sanger argues that “the symbolic use made of mountains and mountaineering” in this ghazal is fundamentally linked to “other heights and mountains” in *Stilt Jack*, including “the Mt. Lykaion of Stickney’s poem, which was the source of *Stilt Jack*’s second epigraph. [...and] *Malachi Stilt-Jack* himself, standing on his *timber toes*, in Yeats, ‘High Talk’” (*SeaRun* 38-39).
- 7 Thompson experienced a great deal of personal strife while composing his ghazals. He dealt with the fallout of an attempted firing at Mount Allison, his marriage disintegrat-

ed, his house and belongings were lost in a fire, and his daughter – originally named on *Stilt Jack*'s dedication page and in Ghazal VIII (*Black Book*) – left the country with his ex-wife. Biographical and mythological readings of *Stilt Jack* routinely cite these losses as the source of Thompson's plunge into darkness rather than considering such a descent as at least partially aesthetic or strategic.

- 8 Sanger quotes the translation Thompson uses in his PhD thesis on Char: "A poem is the realization of love – desire that remains desire; ...The poet, a magician of insecurity, can have only adopted satisfactions. A cinder never quite burned out" (qtd. in *SeaRun* 21).
- 9 Of note here are literary references to Roethke's "The Waking" (cited in the opening lines of couplets nine and ten), Aeschylus' Orestian trilogy (marked by "the kindly ones" that end the poem), the "Ripeness is all" of *King Lear* (in couplet 9, see *SeaRun* 41), and a reference to one of Shirley Gibson's books *I am Watching* (Toronto: Anansi, 1973) (in couplet nine; see note [k] for Ghazal XXXVII in *SeaRun*).

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