

CHRISTOPHER ROBLEY

Yip

Betamax yaks taxidermied actress;
appetites chitchat factual ka-ching!

Rainforests talk Toblerone through
Google Translate's fluent cuneiform.

Some glib bullet grazing razor-grass
either whispers scripture or it won't.

The Om of State breaks moonlight
on the bent bars of its big-ass cage.

Pre-verbal
lip service
avers itself.

Invisible Christ
hanging on
the sniper's crosshairs.

BOOKS IN BRIEF: Negative Capability: A Cure for the “I” Disease?

John Rosenwald

Nicelle Davis, *Becoming Judas* (Pasadena, CA: Red Hen Press, 2013, 112 pp, \$18.95 paper)

TJ Jarrett, *Ain't No Grave* (Kalamazoo, MI: New Issues Press, 2013, 104 pp, \$15 paper)

Brian Komei Dempster, *Topaz* (New York, NY: Four Way Books, 2013, 119 pp, \$15.95 paper)

John Keats described “negative capability” as the ability to exist “in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (letter to his brothers, 28 December 1817). Many have adopted the phrase Keats apparently coined; some have used it as the basis for sophisticated philosophical systems. But Keats mostly wanted to convey a sense he articulated more fully in other letters, where he praised Shakespeare for his absence of personality, his gift for entering dramatic characters without suffusing them with his own self. Keats regarded this skill as central to the calling of a poet. Most accessibly, he illustrated the experience with a simple and profound image when he announced, “if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel” (letter to B. Bailey, 22 November 1817).

The empathy cherished by Romantic poets such as Keats developed in part from the late eighteenth-century distinction between sentiment and sentimentality. Later in the nineteenth century Robert Browning explored the poetic possibilities inherent in negative capability through his development of the dramatic monologue, a technique adopted for their own purposes early in the twentieth century by Ezra Pound, by T. S. Eliot in his portrayal of Prufrock, and more recently by many other modern and post-modern poets.

The ability momentarily to abandon self, to enter the personality of another, and to use the perception gained to craft character and reveal a vision of a world other than one’s own provides a means of creating literature that moves us, perhaps partially by avoiding the egocentricity of so much contemporary American poetry, the “I disease.” Negative capability moves beyond empathy to include not only feeling for, but also immersion in, the other. It involves *becoming* the sparrow.