

“Naming is Recognition” For Peter Quartermain



Michael Davidson

It is difficult to imagine the study of modern American poetry without Peter Quartermain's example. Or perhaps I should say it's hard to imagine a particular strain of modernism for which he is uniquely responsible, one that he and Rachel Blau du Plessis in their book call "the objectivist nexus." That nexus includes Pound, Williams, Oppen, Zukofsky, and Williams to be sure, but it also gathers Susan Howe, Basil Bunting, Gertrude Stein, Lyn Hejinian, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Richard Caddell, Mina Loy and Robert Duncan, to name a few that would be included in the Quartermain nexus. He has written definitive essays on all of these figures and more, and in so doing has carved a path through modernism that subsequent critics often imagine they have invented, the path having been so well trod by Peter.

One thing that supremely distinguishes his literary criticism is its precision. He does not deal in generalities or theoretical jargon but hews close to the word or phrase. He botanizes on textual effluvia, troubling a word's etymology or a sentence's grammatical form with a terrier-like focus. If this attention to the text is unfashionable in today's theory driven critical climate it is no less theoretical in its speculative rigor. His unpacking in *Disjunctive Poetics* of several

sentences of Gertrude Stein (“A Narrative of Undermine”) and his study, in the same book, of the incremental growth of Zukofsky’s *A* are good illustrations of this. But it also shows up in his magisterial edition of Robert Duncan’s *Collected Early Poems and Plays*, recently published by the University of California Press. As editor, Peter has made all of the right decisions by going to the first edition of Duncan’s books as copy text but providing useful apparatus at the back to record Duncan’s many changes and revisions, subsequent editions and reformulations. He has sensibly respected Duncan’s habit of publishing poems in (or as) “books,” but he has also included poems written and published contemporaneously with those books in this same volume (rather than holding them back for a “collected uncollected” poems). What we have is an edition that will please lay readers of Duncan’s work but which will equally satisfy scholars anxious to have a “definitive” historical account.

The other outstanding feature of Peter’s scholarship is its rhetorical clarity and wit. Somewhat similar to Hugh Kenner but without the often startling connections (Stephen Dedalus as the Wright Brothers, Sam Beckett as bicycle) and Marjorie Perloff, but without the antithetical example (Charles Bernstein vs. *The Golden Treasury*, Robert Creeley vs. William Stafford) he writes in a tradition of great British stylists, from Johnson and Swift to Terry Eagleton and David Lodge. He loves sentences, their sensuality and errancy but also their ability to map the mind’s meanders. It’s a somewhat chatty style that pauses to ask a rhetorical question or view an odd bit of verbal flora. His essay on Niedecker and Bunting gives something of this quality:

They’re such very different poets you’d never mistake one for the other. Niedecker’s language is unmistakably spoken, conversational, at times almost casual—don’t get me wrong, she’s an extremely careful writer of very great skill indeed—but she does not *display* her consciousness of her art. Bunting’s a different story. He started out as more-or-less a satirist, more-or-less focusing in his earliest Odes on social and political absurdities, the passage of time and how we waste it, his own desolate condition turned his back on love. A bit of posturing about some of those earlier poems, something of the *poete maudit*, the doomed poet, a self-conscious literariness about it all.

Such passages invite readers to respond rather than keep them at arm's length. He has a contrast to make, but along the way he tells us exactly what differentiates these two poets, setting us up for his anticipated comparison—in this case as poets of the social and literary margins (of “borders and border creatures, the overlooked and the unrespectable”). “The mind is shapely,” a quote that applies as much to Quartermain’s style as to the poet’s conjecture.

I celebrate Peter Quartermain’s contributions to poetry. He has been a faithful servant of the art for many years through his letterpress editions, his magazines, his antiquarian collecting, his editing, his genial conversation. He has managed to carve out a “live tradition” without canonizing an era or charting oedipal blindnesses. I can’t think of anyone who more thinks *through* the poem on his way *to* the poem.