

Quartermain's Terms: *Disjunctive Poetics*



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1966: at the University of British Columbia, Peter Quartermain, as he tells us in the Preface to his marvelous *Disjunctive Poetics*, was conducting a seminar on William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky: it became the germ of a bravura piece on the first half of “A”-9 and its author’s transformation of the most various of materials—the “new” physics, Marxist doctrine, the elegant verse forms of Cavalcanti, and so on—to create an extraordinary poetic structure. “It is irrelevant whether Zukofsky is here a Marxist or a Buddhist,” Peter explains, “It does not matter at all” (86). “The poem itself, the text, is not concerned with the content which came before” (88). And it is the poem itself, not its “pre-text,” that counts.

If this sounds like the New Criticism, think again. For the New Critics, still dominant in the Academy in 1966, it was the semantics of the poem that mattered. John Donne’s “The Canonization,” for example, so Cleanth Brooks tells us, was built on the elaborate metaphor of devoted lovers as saints, making a subtle and witty case for the poet’s argument that sexual love was the highest secular good. In New Critical discussions of lyrics like Donne’s, poetry was held to be image-full language: metaphor, symbol, conceit, catachresis: these were analyzed in great detail, with sound, syntax,

and visual layout taking very much a second place—or often no place at all. In New Critical discourse, T. S. Eliot was the great Modernist, the complexities of tone prompting exciting debate over the relation of speaker to poet. Was Prufrock Eliot? Was Gerontion? Or was Eliot treating these “characters” satirically? And in the poetry of Robert Frost: what is the *attitude* of the “I” in “The Road not Taken”? Is he serious? Ironic? Does he really regret his choice?

In this scheme of things, there was no room for a “literal” poet like Williams—a poet whose short lyrics avoided metaphor, dramatic monologue, and formal verse, focusing on such features as line break, tense shift, and syntactic suspension to create poetry. Presumably, Quartermain’s seminar took up those issues. But a whole seminar on Williams and Zukofsky? Most academics in 1966 had barely heard of the latter. I finished graduate school in 1965 and don’t recall my professors so much as mentioning Zukofsky’s name even though two of them were devoted Pound scholars. In those days, contemporary poetry meant Robert Lowell and John Berryman (they too, after all, Poundians of a sort); it meant Theodore Roethke and Sylvia Plath. Dissertations on Roethke were ubiquitous: at the University of Maryland where I was teaching from 1972–76, I remember directing three! The greenhouse as symbol of a lost paradise: that was a favorite topic, as was the tension between filial love and fear in such poems as “My Papa’s Waltz.” Again, mental hospital poems were very popular: these boasted memorable symbols like the locked razor in Lowell’s “Waking in the Blue” or the tulips in Plath’s poem by that title, seen as fiery red, menacing presences in the peaceful world of the white hospital room.

In this context, Peter was a true pioneer. He did not criticize the Establishment; he merely ignored it. You won’t find the names Roethke or Plath in his index: rather the first chapter of *Disjunctive Poetics* features Gertrude Stein, whose work, writes Peter, “constitutes a more or less systematic investigation of the formal elements of language and of literature: parts of speech, syntax, morphemics, etymology, punctuation, the sentence, the paragraph; description, narration, poetry, prose, drama, and genre (my list is not exhaustive).” What Peter understood—and in this he resembles that other great Canadian critic Hugh Kenner—is that poetry is in fact a particular deployment of language, that, in Wittgenstein’s words, “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” When Stein puts

down the three words “Roast potatoes for” under the title “ROAST POTATOES” in *Tender Buttons*, far from writing nonsense, she is, so Peter notes (p. 23), exploring the enormous possibilities of putting together simple words—“roast” can be adjective or verb, “for” can mean “for dinner,” “four” (as in the jump-rope rhyme “One potato, two potato, three potato, four”), au four (French for oven), and so on. And then those roast potatoes relate to all those other foods in “Tender Buttons” in a verbal symphony of great complexity.

In his attention to such collocations of poetic language—his chosen authors in *Disjunctive Poetics* are Stein, Louis Zukofsky, Basil Bunting, Charles Reznikoff, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, and Susan Howe—Peter gets down to the very bedrock of what makes poetry “news that stays news,” in Poundian terms.

How nice it would be to think that twenty years after the publication of *Disjunctive Poetics*, his critical example would have been widely followed.

But although Quartermain’s Canon is more widely accepted in 2013 than it was in the late 60s, there has been much backsliding. Stein is a case in point: consider Janet Malcolm’s 2008 *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice*, which openly dismisses the Stein of *Tender Buttons* and the other experimental works as, quite simply, “unreadable.” Indeed, at this writing, the BBC is about to unveil a program, for which I was interviewed, called “Does Anyone Read Gertrude Stein?”

Still, the poets Peter has written about so brilliantly in *Disjunctive Poetics* and, most recently, in *Stubborn Poetry: Poetic Facticity and the Avant-Garde* (Alabama, 2013), have gradually found the audiences they deserve. Writing about Susan Howe’s “Scattering as Behavior toward Risk,” for example, at a time (1985) when Howe was still writing, so to speak, on the margins, Peter studies every parenthesis, comma, and blank space so as to understand her “enchanted fascination with and desperate possession by history and with language” (183). In preparing himself for such a reading, Peter has clearly read all of Howe’s earlier work, absorbed her commentary on Dickinson and Melville, and studied the genetic texts that she is here appropriating. His “close readings” are never performed cold; rather, he is like an athlete who, having undergone training, can make it look as if a complex move on the tennis or basketball court, is perfectly natural.

Such readings gave permission to younger critics to tackle difficult poems, or again poems like Bruce Andrews’s “All I want / All I want /

Hollywood / Hollywood,” that seem too minimalist to matter. Peter’s is a criticism that provides us with the opening of the field. And yet—and here is a nice irony—Peter is emphatically not a theorist: you never find him using the graduate student’s favorite locution, “as Agamben says. . .,” “as Foucault observes. . .” “as Adorno puts it. . .” Perhaps it is his thoroughly English grammar and high school education that has saved him from making profound abstractions and sweeping generalizations. He is scholarly without trying to “place” a given poet in a fixed tradition or comparative historical chain. His critical position is perhaps best described as a visionary pragmatism, one that sees the world in a grain of sand, finding no verbal/visual/sonic detail too trivial, too unimportant to talk about and make radiant. As such, his critical writing has the quality of the poetry he writes about: it cannot be easily read, only re-read! *Disjunctive Poetics*, now twenty years old, is just coming into its own.

Happy 80th Birthday, Peter!