

# Stubborn Poetries: Poetic Facticity and the Avant-Garde

by Peter Quartermain

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“The majority of the following poems,” Wordsworth wrote in the brief “Advertisement” prefacing the first (1798) edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, “are to be considered as experiments.” Of course, one problem facing “experimental” – or “innovative,” or “avant-garde” – writing is finding an audience prepared for its disruptions, willing to follow its deviations from the norm: his own readers, Wordsworth anticipated, “will perhaps frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to enquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title.”

Wordsworth felt compelled to become *Lyrical Ballads*’s first explainer, in the lengthy Preface he wrote for the 1802 expanded reprint of the book; later, his collaborator Coleridge would devote a chapter of the 1817 *Biographia Literaria* to explaining what he and Wordsworth had been up to in a book which so decisively rejected the “gaudiness and inane phraseology” of the run-of-the-mill poetry of the day.

Like Wordsworth and Coleridge, twentieth-century avant-garde writers have been their own interpreters – think of Stein’s “Composition as Explanation,” Joyce’s endlessly detailed “schemata” of

the structure of *Ulysses*, Pound's prose works and letters (which often read as commentaries on concurrently in-progress *Cantos*), and any number of essays and manifestos by Eliot, Mina Loy, David Jones, and so many others – but much of the heavy lifting required to mediate “difficult” texts for baffled readers has always been done by critics and scholars. A lot of what we understood of “high” modernism four decades ago was established in a series of brilliant volumes – on Pound, Joyce, Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, Beckett, etc. – by that irascible arch-Catholic Hugh Kenner. More recently, Marjorie Perloff, in what seems like a never-ending stream of books, essays, and reviews, has enthusiastically mapped and described a landscape of recondite new postwar poetries.

My own totemic figure among critics of twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry has for a long time now been the English-born Canadian critic Peter Quartermain. When I was first grappling with the work of Louis Zukofsky and, like any good grad student, dutifully reading through what we call the “secondary literature,” I noted two things: first, there hadn't been a hell of a lot written about Zukofsky; and second, a sizeable proportion of the very best essays on his work had been written by one Peter Quartermain. Quartermain's paper trail was not extensive: he had edited several volumes on twentieth-century American poets in that reference library staple, the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, a labor which would not win one many laurels in the academy, but which was likely to help one towards a more comprehensive view of the field; and he had written a number of brilliant, jewel-like essays, sparkling with wit and interpretive insight and displaying the results of hard and discerning archival research.

Those essays were collected twenty years ago in *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* (Cambridge University Press, 1992). Since then Quartermain has become a major figure in the landscape of contemporary poetry. With the English poet Richard Caddel he edited *Other: British and Irish Poetry Since 1970* (Wesleyan University Press, 1999), and with Rachel Blau DuPlessis *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics* (University of Alabama Press, 1999). For the past few years Quartermain has been hard at work on an edition of Robert Duncan's collected poems and plays, the first (massive) volume of which was published last year by the University of California Press. But *Stubborn Poetries*, perhaps surprisingly, is only the second full-length book to appear with

Quartermain's name as author.

It's pointless to ask whether it's been worth the wait – and the twenty years since *Disjunctive Poetics* is, after all, a very long time: *Stubborn Poetries* is, simply put, a rich and marvellous collection, like its precursor a book that should be on the shelf of any serious reader of postwar poetry. Well – of a particular strain of postwar poetry, that is. Part of what Quartermain intends by “stubborn” poetry is *difficult*, obdurate poetry, writing in the modernist tradition that resists easy explication, blithe consumption. The canon celebrated here runs from Pound, Williams, Loy and Stein down through the Objectivists – Zukofsky, Lorine Niedecker, and George Oppen, along with their Northumbrian associate Basil Bunting – to Robert Creeley and various poets associated with the “Language” movement, Steve McCaffery, Lyn Hejinian, and Bruce Andrews. Along the way there are fascinating essays on a couple of outriders, Robin Blaser and the Englishman Richard Caddel, and a quartet of pieces on more general topics: bibliography in the age of the “distributed” book, the possibility of a “proper” oral performance of a poem, the sort of “facts” that a poem deals with and indeed *makes*.

Quartermain is a splendid reader of Bunting, and “Basil Bunting: Poet of the North” both examines Bunting specifically as an outsider to the largely southern English tradition, and serves as an excellent introduction to Bunting's work for those who might be unfamiliar with it. Bunting's correspondent Zukofsky is well served here (in three essays), as is Lorine Niedecker (in two), who, as Quartermain demonstrates, is both a regionalist writer – a product of Wisconsin in the same way Bunting is a product of Northumberland – and a poet whose work strikes a deep, “universal” note, whose technique is as subtle and powerful as anyone around's.

It's good to read Quartermain on Blaser, who for too long has languished in the shadows of his friends Duncan and Jack Spicer. It's even better to read him on Caddel, a very fine poet who is almost entirely unknown in the United States, though I could have wished for less encomium and more interpretation – or at the very least quotation – of Caddel's work in the essay “Writing on Air for Dear Life.” Quartermain is capable of lapsing into a kind of clotted academese, especially when he's pursuing a tendentious tack, but for the most part his prose is delightfully wiry, precise and witty; this is especially true when he's writing about poets whose work he obvious

loves – Bunting, Niedecker – or when he’s addressing an under appreciated countryman like Caddel.

What really makes *Stubborn Poetries* worth the price of admission, however, are Quartermain’s close readings. While Perloff will occasionally trot out a moment of scansion in order to make some point about a (usually) free verse poem, Quartermain has a rare gift for taking apart the stress patterns of a set of lines and showing how they work, all the while paying careful attention to sequences of consonantal and vowel sounds. This is prosodic analysis pursued with a purpose. He’s every bit as good at analyzing syntax, testing the possible combinations in which words might fit together. There’s a kind of breathtaking *gravitas*, a combination of extreme concentration, painstaking attention, and sheer old-fashioned *patience* in his close readings.

This serves him best, perhaps paradoxically, when he’s reading the ostensibly most “unreadable” of his texts, the obdurately reader-resistant works of McCaffery and Andrews. No, he doesn’t tell us what they *mean*, and that’s precisely the point; more usefully and more importantly, he shows us precisely how they simultaneously hold out the possibility of meaning (or meanings) and refuse any sort of semantic closure, the easy takeaway beloved of undergraduate paper-writers and book reviewers. Quartermain, for my money is the best reader of the illegible around.

I’m mildly frustrated, however, by his repeated insistence on their being some ultimately political charge in much of the “stubborn” poetry he so values, some utopian or liberatory – or at the very least critical – potential inherent in the “difficult” text. It’s an argument that’s quite familiar from the Language poets, of course (though Geoffrey Hill has been caught making it lately, as well), and Quartermain gestures towards it in several of these essays. One variety is the old chestnut, familiar from any number of manifestos and essays produced in San Francisco and New York over the 1980s, of the difficult text making the reader a co-creator of meaning; this is surely true, I suppose, but I have yet to be convinced – even by Quartermain’s honeyed and sinewy prose – that this is somehow necessarily *liberatory*. Quartermain, however, makes the argument for a utopian potential in experimental writing about as well and subtly as it can be made, and he rarely lets his ideological arguments get in the way of his nimble and ingenious close readings. I only wish he had

allowed more space for what I'd nominate as the most utopian and liberatory affect of all – that of sheer readerly *pleasure*. Bruce Andrews's amazing and sometimes repellent *Lip Service*, in Quartermain's account, seems about as pleasant as a root canal: painful but good for you in the long run. It's really much more fun than that – honest! – if one can muster the necessary irony and *sang-froid* to tackle its jagged sexual and ideological aiguilles.

Quartermain is quite up-front about the occasionality of these pieces, and there's really no over arching argument tying the essays of *Stubborn Poetries* into a single foreseen curve. And that's just fine: this is a collection of celebrations and smart readings – readings in which “smart” very often edges over into “brilliant” – by one of the most intelligent and sensitive readers of poetry of our day, one of the finest sets of ears (backed by one of the most learned and inquisitive minds) of our moment. Yes – it was worth the wait.