

*Growing Dumb: An Autobiography
of an English Education*
by Peter Quartermain

(Zat-So Productions, Montréal – Vancouver, 2021)



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In his Preface to this unforgettable memoir Peter Quartermain brings us immediately face-to-face with the power of language:

To ‘utter’, a word I love, comes from deep in the throat. It comes from a void. We don’t know what we are doing when we come to utterance. Closer to stutter than to mutter, both of which contain it. To utter is to bring language to the edge of the sayable.

As he reconstructs his childhood recollections of what happened to himself and his family in September 1939, the day war broke out, he presents us with the exactness of what one would later come to expect from a man who wrote so sensitively and precisely about the Objectivists in America and about Basil Bunting in the North of England. The actual day war broke out is vividly there in the ‘dust hanging in the air from the coconut matting all rolled up one side of the kitchen’ and ‘it was the slow drip of the kitchen tap I could hardly reach.’ The importance of what we come to recognise as ‘home’, whether this was in the Birmingham of the British Midlands or in country villages brings to mind what Gaston Bachelard wrote about

the poetics of space when he suggested that ‘by approaching the house images with care not to break up the solidarity of memory and imagination, we may hope to make others feel all the psychological elasticity of an image that moves us at an unimaginable depth.’

As the Quartermain family moved to the village of Wheaton Aston it was to a place that was never to feel like home:

...home was in Shirley, lots of houses, lots of shops, lots of buses and cars and the baker’s boy and the milkman delivering stuff every morning and a set of traffic lights and a public park with lots of flower beds and a playground with lots of swings and a sandbox.

The repetitions here emphasise the actuality of what was being lost by the move and it is appropriate perhaps to call to mind the comments made by Quartermain in his publication for the Basil Bunting Archive in Durham in 1990:

Language. Language divorced from the immediate is language divorced from what he [Bunting] called “our deepest nature”.

(Basil Bunting: Poet of the North)

Quartermain also recalled for us that Basil Bunting had admired the sixteenth-century French poet Malherbe because whenever he had written anything he would go down to the market in Caen and ask the women there to read it to him and he would then pay them if there were any words they didn’t know:

He didn’t expect them to understand what he was aiming at or even enjoy the poem, but he wished above all things to be meticulous about keeping his language clear and plain.

It is no wonder that Francis Ponge was such an admirer of Malherbe nor is it any surprise that Peter Quartermain should be such an admirer of the Objectivist world of poetry as represented by George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky, Carl Rakosi and Charles Reznikoff, Lorine Niedecker and Basil Bunting. In order to be able to communicate the sharp sense of ‘thereness’, the reality of the past

brought to the immediacy of the present, you have to '*learn* to see things the way other people do.' Quartermain's prose presents us with that vivid reality of a past which still haunts a present and one is struck by the way in which an opening, *une ouverture* as Philippe Jaccottet would have put it, reveals a world that seems immediately alive:

You'd open the cowshed door, pushing through bits of heavy sacking to keep the light from shining out, they smelled of jute and grain and seed, and you'd suddenly be in a different world, the smell of cows, the steady rhythm of milk hissing tinnily into pails, the note shifting as the milk rose higher, straw on the floor and a cow pissing into the gutter behind it, black ropy spiderwebs up in the rafters...

In addition to the wealth of family memories brought to life in this autobiography there are whole sections which deal with the nature of schooling and the strange world of the boarding community with its own rules and pathways that have to be followed. One is often reminded of Dickens's Dotheboys Hall as the Headmaster 'called us all in to The Big Room' to shout at us that "The forecourt is out-of-bounds! When you come into this building you use the back or the side door":

Nobody had ever spoken to me like that before, he was the most terrifying man I'd ever met...

The world of the 1940s boarding-school in a rural British setting is brought to life in such a way that you can *feel* the emptiness of the School on a Sunday 'so palpable you could almost touch it, the silence so strong you could *hear* it':

Matron nowhere to be found, the Housemaster nowhere to be found, the kitchen closed down, tables and counters clean, all the dishes on their shelves, the clock quietly ticking, everything in its proper place, no one round the bike sheds, all of us left to fend for ourselves...

However, there is another side to schooling and it is both sharp

perception and a widening literary perspective that permits Quartermain to associate his own milking of cows on the farm with the experience of childhood familiarity portrayed by D.H. Lawrence in *The Rainbow* which he went on to read in the early 1950s recognising a 'familiar chord':

Even now as I write this I can feel the warmth radiating from that complete otherness of the cow, that flow of quiet energy profoundly indifferent to my own, the sheer uncompromising physicality obscurely disturbing no matter how familiar as I chivvied cows about in the fields or when I milked one, the idea of it, that mild oiliness building up on my skin as I pulled on those teats, it sticks between my fingers near the knuckle joints as I sit and think on it...

Memories leave their relics on the beach and as Rachel Blau DuPlessis points out in her words which close this remarkable volume the prose rhythms of Peter Quartermain's sentences leave 'a whole bunch of sea wrack, shells and old plastic on our shore'. This is a book that must be read.