

# Some Words for Peter Quartermain



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Peter Quartermain can listen to the sound of a poem and read the words of it. This is not easy to do because it requires a lot of abiding. One has to abide unruly poems without trying to bring them to order. Mysteries, uncertainties and doubts, the man said. But if poetry is not to reduce to a kind of soft philosophy, then it must be read for its words because that is where the poem does its work as a poem. If the words suggest ideas, the poem says, then that is nice if you the reader like that sort of thing, but I, the poem, will stick with my words and when you the reader are done translating them into thought-things, then you will find that my words are still there, waiting for you. *Disjunctive Poetics* is about reading words and hearing sounds, and the miracle of this most patient of books is that all the little difficult poems calm down and start to play when they are listened to rather than whacked into submission.

Example 1: “Roast potatoes for.” Roast may be an adjective or it may be a verb; “for” may be a preposition or it may be a pun on “four,” a French oven (23).<sup>\*</sup> So Stein serves up raw spuds from what seem to be cooked ones and cooked from what seem to be raw. You never know what might be coming out of the oven or who might be coming for dinner. Maybe there will be four of them. Transformation

is the operative act, Quartermain says. Read this way, the phrase becomes sensual, as in full of sense, moving “within and among a plurality of semantic, syntactic, sonic, and referential fields” (23).

Example 2: “A” - 9, a poem some have read as “Marx in verse” (86). But Marx is a system-maker and Zukofsky is a poet whose poem, because it is full of restless words, is a hard one to put down and get to sleep in the crib of reference (87). In fact, with a little encouragement, it gets right up again and begins to radiate in all senses. The words of Marx and Henry Adams and Cavalcanti cut through each other not to confirm the progressive values of the poet which no doubt he did hold, but to open up an experience of valuing (89) where love and labour circulate around and through word-things that hold onto their thingyness. Quartermain, one gets the feeling, is not very interested in systems.

Example 3:

“on a [p < suddenly . . . on a > was shot thro with a dyed → < dyed → a soft]”  
 (became the vision)(the rea) after Though [though]That  
 Fa (Susan Howe qtd in Quartermain 183)

This is Susan Howe in “Scattering as Behavior toward Risk,” with some utterly wild lines that dance around the genetic text of Billy Budd. But wildness is the point, Quartermain says--the poem resists settlement, busts out from beneath the paved grid of good order, and drags us through the bushes of sense: “small islands of localised meaning, a haze of uncertain stumbling bursting into pockets of lucidity, clearings in the thicket, the movement toward coherence . . . shifting instantly to fragmentation and incompleteness . . . the lines diminishing down to the initial and terminal fragment “Fa” of line three” (184-85).

Active listening, active seeing, active letting-be--a “hatred of pomposity, a mischievous eye” (135); much “patience and common sense” (137); and “an insistence on the tangible world, a scrupulous attention to detail” (139). So the poems fluff and huffle and spread themselves out under the eye and ear of this best of companions. And lucky Robert Duncan, to have for his editor an ideal reader.

\*All citations from Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge UP, 1992.