

Un-Done poetries:

Meredith Quartermain's *Matter* and Kate Eichhorn's *Fond*

Reviewed by Stephen Collis

Recent posts on the Poetry Foundation's website—both in *Poetry* magazine itself, and on the Foundation's "Harriet" blog (and in its comments stream)—are indicative of a (perhaps not surprisingly) conservative backlash, on a formal level, against what is for many the core advance of twentieth century poetics: open form, composition by field, and the process-orientation of the serial poem. Jason Guriel writes that "what our era is lacking" is (quoting Camille Paglia, *ahem*) "distinctive, self-contained poems." Mike Theune agrees, noting that "an increased focus on the book, the project, and/or process does tend to override the centrality of the single poem." And finally, the irascible Bill Knott chimes in with his pronouncement (apparently staged for an audience of one: Ron Silliman) that the battle between the so-called "School of Quietude" and what Knott dubs the "School of Noisiness" is a privileging of the "poem" (by the former) versus a privileging of "poetry" (by the latter): "we SOQs continue to want to write the perfect poem, and the SONs have abandoned that quest to pursue their endless unconfined poetic—it's poem vs poetry."

This all strikes me as incredibly dated, like some performance from the middle of the last century, complete with stodgy gentleman-poet slamming his copy of *The Well Wrought Urn* on his roll-top desk and shouting "damn if I'll ever admit *Paterson* [or *The Cantos*, or *Howl*] is poetry!" I thought we did this long ago? Robert Duncan gave to my mind the best dismissal to this either/or debate when he suggested that the *truly* "open" poetic would have to *include* the "closed." I think this is in part what the serial poem does: it forces us to read the page/poem as both an autonomous unit *and* a fragment of an evolving whole. Of course, one thing the "poem vs poetry" rubric ignores is the great variety of, shall we call them, "undone" poetries? Serials from HD's *Trilogy* to Roger Farr's *Surplus* deploy reasonably self-contained, shaped (and mostly page-length) "poems" in their "poetry." Moving along the scale in the direction of formal "undoing," Pound's *Cantos* and Duplessis's *Drafts* are built of obviously separate "poems," each often a long poem in itself, with its own themes, formal problems to be worked out, and intellectual and emotional "tone;" however, each poem is also very much part of a broad project unfolding over decades and dealing with extremely large and ambitious issues (culture, history, politics) that are themselves virtually "borderless." Next we would come to truly "undone" series, such as Oppen's *Of Being Numerous*, in which the individual "poems" are minimalist pauses in an open-ended process. Finally, there are the "book" projects where sequence and series is often given over to a spatial mapping of form and content, as in Williams's *Paterson*, Olson's *Maximus*, and much of Susan Howe's work.

Why rehears all of this? Two reasons. First, because I cannot help feeling the appeal to the lost "centrality of the single poem" (and thus to the small, discrete, finished and contained) betrays a fearful turning away from the larger questions (culture, history, politics, once again), and thus a lowering of poetry's ambitions (let's just get this one

page right, OK?). And second, because the book I am trying to write about here, Meredith Quatermain's *Matter* (bookthug 2008), is an excellent refusal of the "poem vs poetry" either/or. It is also a book-project which (ambitiously) places the issue of categorization, taxonomy, division and order at its centre. *Matter* is divided into 28 poems which, with condensed precision and looping persistence, attempt to undo the taxonomical work of Peter Mark Roget (he of the eponymous thesaurus) and his Darwinian categorization of the "species" of words. Quatermain quotes Roget at the end of her book:

The principle by which I have been guided in framing my verbal classification is the same as that which is employed in the various departments of Natural History.

Roget further comments that "Mind is essentially distinct from matter," but he concedes that, via language, "the attributes of the one are metaphorically transferred to those of the other." Quatermain, finding her intellectual seam, gets down to mining the gold "At the border crossing from Mind into Matter," where we "find seepage and infusion" (64). In poetry, we witness the *materiality* of mind—its soundings and syntactic (and asyntactic) movements. "Words matter the world" (54), and thus (tweaking William Carlos Williams's dicta), the poet of matter will have "No ideas but in word things" (64).

If category is being undercut here (are these finely-turned urn-poems, or segments of a boundless poetry?)—matter is mind, mind matter—word a thing, things words—then there is no better guide than sound, that pivot upon which poetry turns as it swings between syntax and semantics, reference and self-referentiality. Note, in the following passage, how Quatermain uses the tone leading of vowels to interweave sound and sense:

imagine a perceptual mobile
of small rigidities and links
to a common desert,
a common found impossible, a quaggy wild
around Man's islands of sense
imagine these aisles to eyelets archipelago –
to inlets, friths, mouths, lagoons' capillary tubes
of ingenuity, magnetic, electric
with liquid, moss and slush. (44)

"Man's islands" "archipelago" (a nicely verbed noun)—coalesce into the "common" via the links of a "perceptual mobile" and "quaggy wild" with its "liquid, moss and slush." Just so, the vowel patterns here slip and slide in tune with the passage's sense—the long and short "i" sounds (*imagine, mobile, rigidities, links*—on down through *islands, aisles, capillary, ingenuity and liquid*) always accompanied by long resounding "o"s (*mobile, common, found, around, archipelago, mouths, moss*).

If the Darwinian project creates seemingly closed categories—"To know is to locate in a hierarchy of naming," Quatermain writes (65)—it also demonstrates how, across history,

one thing has evolved into another (linguistically, the field of etymology). Quartermain is for the most part not overt in her critique of, or commentary on, classification, naming, and the relation of mind and matter. This is poetry, not a philosophical disquisition, so while much thinking is undertaken, we encounter it while slinking through sonic passages like the example quoted above. Mind is indeed matter here, nature a thick blanket of words.

Matter has been published in the same year as another Quartermain book, *Nightmarker* (NeWest)—the continuation of her project of the historical and geographical exploration of Vancouver begun in *Vancouver Walking* (2005). While I ought to be pre-disposed to the poetics of the latter book, with its Olsonian investments, I find myself more enthralled by—and more entangled in—the thick of *Matter*. This is where I want poetry to take me: into the very material we make our histories and geographies out of—the tangle of language we frame everything in.

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If Quartermain's *Matter* is a book that troubles the poem/poetry either/or, Kate Eichhorn's first book, *Fond* (also published by bookthug), doesn't even hesitate, opting unrepentantly for "poetry" and the open-ended book-project. *Fond* is a fictional archive—the textual remnants of some hypothetical documents found "in a recycling bin" by an "archivist" and "processed" for us to read. Looking over *Fond*'s disarray of supposed drafts and stray archival markings (slips with call numbers written on them, marginalia, lists, notes, diagrams, charts), I am reminded of Walter Benjamin's remark that the book is "an outdated mediation between two filing systems"—"when," Benjamin pines, "when shall we actually write books like catalogues?" Eichhorn has done just this—but her archive, however carefully catalogued (the book begins with the details of the hypothetical archive's contents, complete with the thickness of its main manuscript, "Case Studies": "2 inches"), reveals itself to be preserved chaos, with little inherent or imposable order. Jacques Derrida, whose *Archive Fever* is one of the intertexts at the heart of this book, notes that "anarchiving destruction belongs to the process of archivization and produces the very thing it reduces" (94). To make order is to simultaneously and inescapably make disorder. This double-edged sword we call "culture."

This is a gorgeous book, and one that leaves much room for thought—on the page, and in the reader's mind. I'm an unrepentant fan of the archive as such, and of Eichhorn's book. Though I did find myself wanting more—more of the archive's strange and stray markings, more of its chaos and detritus. One of Eichhorn's strengths is that she, at least, resisted the temptation of excess, and has bravely given us a book filled with holes and absences—which is just what the true experience of the archive provides. Susan Howe, I note, in working on "Melville's Marginalia," was tempted to make her text primarily out of the markings Melville made in the margins of books he read. Her notebooks and manuscripts of the poem contain page after page with carefully drawn lines, ticks, and slashes—minus the text those markings once annotated. Howe eventually kept few of these markings in the poem she published; Eichhorn, whose work compares nicely with

Howe's, has managed the opposite: she has kept the marginalia, and left most of the "actual" text out.

Again, as in Quartermain's book, the concept of taxonomy is in question here: "categories chafing blistering taxonomies," leading to "knowledge leaking" across categorical frontiers. Much of *Fond* is (paradoxically) "about" what *is not in it* as such (which is very true of the archive too). The erased. The misplaced. The trace.

Fond contains I think a good deal of collaged material from a number of sources. I could pick out the Derrida (from *Archive Fever*), having dipped into it for my own work. There are others, though I haven't had time to track them all down. A page containing a library call number in a scrawled list leads me to Ann Cvetkovitch's *An Archive of Feeling: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (also the source of *Fond*'s epigraph). This seems an important clue: elsewhere we read, "order maintains / a self in labels / sterilized / forbidden." Does *Fond* display the detritus of (as Cvetkovitch titles her final chapter) an "archive of lesbian feelings"? Possibly. An opening note in the text ("Attention Readers") ends: "Isolate the body. Wear gloves. Monitor fever symptoms. Recall each bead accelerates depletion. Damn the spillage!" What "body" is being "isolated" here? What (archive) fever is being watched? What sort of (emotional/somatic/sexual) "spillage" is being "damned"? Archives pose questions, but offer few answers.

Some would-be editor/archivist has noted (and/or erased by crossing out) that "the author's draft is a disappearing art." The computer-generated draft erases its tracks (being old-school and somewhat anal—and in love with paper—I print drafts everywhere, scribble on them, re-draft, then save that too). Elements of *Fond* we come to feel have been removed, its tracks erased. A "Scope and Content Note" that appears near the beginning of the text reappears near then end, in an edited version that—"track-changes" style—reveals its edits. What has been removed, in part, are references to an "experience in question," something potentially associated with "conflict," a "psychical element." "Desire," we are told elsewhere, is in close proximity to "forgetfulness." In the archive, what we want leads on us everywhere—but it always escapes.

To return to my opening comments, nowhere in *Fond* does one find such a thing as a "poem." But there is poetry everywhere. "Dichtung=Condensare," Pound once pronounced: to write poetry is to compress, condense, collapse. This is the art Eichhorn practices.

again iterability so many ways to tell this shape
the inevitable to resist this how adept packing it
all back how convenient quotations sentential for
invention no novelty punctuation charts a course
back full of books could crack open every passion
borders on borders the chaos of everything you've
loved inscriptions depleting threads litter the sea
with fragments the chaotic the collector's memories

underside of rack and pincers living with structures
excavations the annotator's fingers prying the lowly
art of the cento vilely inventive fictions unraveling
name period an excess of terminal familiar dwelling

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