

‘Peter Riley’s *Excavations*: the poem as space of collection.’

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I’d like to begin by thanking you for the opportunity to speak here today, about a collection that may well be unfamiliar to some of you, and so probably merits an introduction. It’s a collection of prose poems by a contemporary British poet called Peter Riley. The collection’s called *Excavations*, it was published in 2004, and the paper I’m presenting today is itself an excavation, of the subjects, forms and some of the implications of these poems.

On hearing this you may be tempted to ask: why? Why examine this poet, and this poetry collection? Why, from the myriad examples of collecting and gathering that are being thought about here today, examine a collection of poems at all? What I want to suggest today is that ‘Excavations’ stands at the intersection of many contradictory fields, where poetry hesitates on the border of its own history, archaeology on the border of its own theatre, and speech on the border of its own citation. And so it reveals unexpected flashes of illumination, unexpected connections, which give new life to its subject.

Each poem is in Riley’s words a “meditation” on an individual Bronze Age burial mound. These burials are known to the poet through 19th century excavation reports, such as JR Mortimer’s monumental *Forty Years’ Researches in British and Saxon Burial Mounds in East Yorkshire*, published in 1905. Such source materials are woven into the body of the poems as quotations, although any claim that might thereby be made to an authority beyond the text is immediately undercut by Riley’s admission that he has employed a “10% anarchic principle” of feigned or misremembered quotation (Riley 2004, 6). Another layer is added to an already-complex mixture of ethical concerns and precise descriptions by fragments of 16th and 17th century lyrics, madrigals and carols, dug up by Riley from books or from his memory and presented, as far as possible, in their original orthography.

It’s hard to imagine what kind of reading experience this might produce without taking a concrete example, and so what I’d like to do is examine one particular poem in a little more detail, and tease out a little more fully some of the threads of thought I’ve just alluded to.

This is the second poem in the collection, as the 2 in the corner indicates, and it’s based on Mortimer’s report on mound number 139, as the number in the right shows:

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folded in river clay, the boat on the hilltop / lying East-West facing upwards *the right hand on the right shoulder, the left arm across the body* gradients of sleep, to die, to dream, to mean – *beyond his feet to the East a row of three circular pits or stake-holes* dawn trap as the compass arc closes southwards and the heart is secured by azimuth, all terrors past: **She only drave me to dispaire** / dead child, cancelled future in a satellite cloak hovering to SE. Yet the loss, folded into history, sails adroit in the clay ship over commerce and habit, bound for (to) this frozen screen where [cursive] we don’t live, but do (love) say, and cannot fail.

The words in italics are drawn from Mortimer, and gesture towards the inhuman, or rather, towards the limit of what is knowable as human. Compass bearings, postures and post holes delineate a border beyond which, as Riley puts it in an interview with Keith Tuma, “there’s always something else, lost, destroyed, pulverised, spoken and perished four thousand years ago, which makes a kind of edge to what we are” (Riley and Tuma 2000).

The bold type, meanwhile, indicates a line taken from the 16th and 17th century composer and lute player John Dowland (1563-1626), and binding them together are Riley’s own words, consisting of part technical vocabulary, the compass arcs and azimuths, part twentieth century technology, as in the satellite cloaks and frozen screens, and part a commonplace folk-psychological vocabulary of hearts, love, meaning and dreaming, which paradoxically is the aspect of the poem’s language it is hardest ascribe meaning to.

If we were to think about the nature of this thing in front of us, this object made of language which foregrounds its disparate sources and the temporal heterogeneity of its parts, many of which bear in the very order of their letters the material traces of their age, we might decide to call such a poem a quasi-object. This term, according to Bruno Latour who borrows it from Michel Serres, designates a hybrid, something that gathers together the ostensibly disparate fields of “object-discourse-nature-society” (Latour 1993, 144).

The simplest contemporary newspaper article, Latour points out, is a sketch of such hybridity (Latour 1993, 1-3), but these poems are more that: not just the skeleton of a sketch but almost a body. I say almost, because if the criterion for bodily existence is autonomy, the poem has a partial autonomy, what you might call a *dependent autonomy*: that is to say, although the poem is nothing but potential until activated by a reader’s breath, for the duration of its being read or heard it holds its diverse materials together through its own means, without appeal to the rules of syntax. So in itself it is neither fully subject nor fully object, but partakes of the qualities of both. Like any good three-dimensional thing, it resists comprehension, always suggesting a backside we cannot see, and yet it’s shot through, rent and riddled, with flashes of the same comprehension it denies us.

When Daniel Tiffany writes that the fleetingly material body of lyric poetry is “meteoric” (Tiffany 2000, 26), that it is “distinguished by its composite nature, by the fact that it falls (or rises) *between* heaven and earth, between astronomy and geology” (102), he not only provides an uncanny echo of the region inhabited by *Excavations* – that is, the human strata between the purity of geometric diagrams and the oblivion of geological time – he also casts the poem as a body extended through space. This complication of physical and rhetorical space is deeply embedded in Western thought, reaching back to the Greek ‘topos’ with its dual meanings of both ‘place’ and ‘topic’, and also expressed in the idea that a poem is a type of inhabitable architecture divided into rooms or stanzas.

It seems strange that it should be so easy to think about poetry in spatial terms, as a collection of words – foldable, portable and equally at home in many different material instantiations – clearly does not *occupy* physical space in the *same* way that a collection of objects does. We might instead say that the poem has a *projected* spatiality, that it suggests spatial dimensions that it doesn’t occupy. In Riley’s work this is accentuated by insistent reference to compass bearings and constellations, which continually orient the contingent bodies of the reader, the poem, and the dead across the grids of geology and astronomy. Poem number 24 provides an example of this:

the edge of the Zodiac (below Venus) that part of the sky where no heavenly bodies rise or set... I paired live, symmetrical, both gazing North with empty eyes *front to back, heads to East* disgendered. *An increasing richness of ornamentation and originality of design* augments to South,

to being, and along this line she / written into this line, she / *head to South facing East but face turned upwards* [...]

It refers to the edge of the Zodiac, heavenly bodies, North, East and South, and presents the 'she' as "written into this line", which is both the line of poetry and the lines of compass bearings.

But whilst these poems may sometimes seem to aspire to the condition of Euclidean axioms, it becomes clear that they nevertheless inhabit a much more chaotic space, one of startling juxtapositions and even superimpositions of space and time. Michel Serres uses the example of a handkerchief which has been crumpled and then torn, causing distant points to suddenly come close together, and close points to pull apart. "This science of nearness and rifts", he continues, "is called topology" (Serres and Latour 1995, 60). This collection can be imagined, therefore, as a contrivance of folded space and folded time, where at the junctures of units of sense, of words, or even of phonemes, temporal crevasses suddenly open as the reading voice skates over and between them. And although any poem presents such a fissured surface when studied at the finest grain of resolution, *Excavations* emphasises this, exploiting the estranging effect of outdated orthography to make its rifts and sutures with contemporary language shocking and unmissable – a good example of this can be found in Poem 75:

"My lyff was lent To an entent and stretch my mental arms on the migration routes [ther stod she] kindly aversing the pole".

The result is a poetry that reflects Serres' conception of time itself, which is one of "stopping points, ruptures, deep wells, chimneys of thunderous acceleration, rendings, gaps", as he puts it in a conversation with Latour (Serres and Latour 1995, 57).

But moving on from the time of these poems, I'd now like to look more at the *space* of *Excavations*, starting with Riley's own conception of what kind of space these poems constitute. A recurring figure throughout the book is the word 'theatre', often presented as a compound, as a theatre of memory, a theatre of closure, death as the occasion of a total theatre, or the burial pit compared to a small theatre's tiers. Further insight into the importance of this theatre for Riley's project comes from his proposal in the Preface:

My own preference is to read the piece whenever possible as a kind of *Xopoc* danced over the exhumed remains, as at that point near the end of many of the tragedies when a screen is drawn back revealing a tableau of death [...]. If so, it is a Chorus often uncertain between tragedy and comedy, whose members do not necessarily agree with each other, or even belong to the same group, and of which the author struggles to assume the leadership, but concerned together with bringing the remotest remnant of presence into a full theatre. (Riley 2004, 5-6)

What interests me here is the way that the dead are reimagined as voices, as a polyvocal chorus with desires and trajectories at odds with the author. It seems to me that the fullest way to interpret this mass of voices is to see them as a kind of ghostly citizenry, and the relationship between them as that between citizens, with disagreement to be overcome, compromise to be made, and a demand to be addressed. In one of the most arresting lines of the book, Riley makes this explicit: "If you write a single word down, the dead rise up before you demanding a city, and democracy" (Riley 2004, 156).

This vision of democracy, as rooted in disagreement rather than consensus, resonates strikingly with Chantal Mouffe's conception of the political. Mouffe believes that the political is

fundamentally conflictual in its nature, and understands democracy as a transformed relation of conflict between groups, a transformation which replaces antagonism with agonism, and turns enemies into adversaries. Whilst she requires a minimum of consensus, on what she calls the “ethico-political values of liberty and equality for all” (Mouffe 2005a, 121), she also insists on the centrality of dissent if politics is not to withdraw into the sedimented practices that produce a supposedly ‘natural’ order. Thus agonistic pluralism, as Mouffe terms it, is a way of legitimising and taming the conflict which always exists in social relations.

This agonism is played out in public space, which must become, as she puts it, “the battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation.” (Mouffe 2005b, 806).

Another contributor to *Making Things Public*, Teresa Hoskyns, pursues this question of agonistic space further, noting that in Greek theatre, ‘agon’ referred to a particular type of play where opposing arguments were set forth in two set speeches of equivalent length (2005, 798). She translates this into spatial terms, writing that “in terms of a building, an agon could therefore be seen as a courtroom or stadium” as both of these are oval forms with two central focal points.

The relationship between the city, which the dead demand, and the theatre which Riley provides in response to this demand, is far from straightforward. *Excavations* though could be seen as the inheritor of a classical relationship, whereby the theatre is an instrument for questioning the laws and the customs of the city to which it forms a counterweight. And yet as each era merits its own public space, Riley provides not one solid theatre for one body politic, which could be visualised in the manner of Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, with each subject subsumed in the body of their sovereign, nor even a courtroom with two focal points, but a riddled, fractured, and multiple edifice with many shifting points of focus. And within this impossible theatre, only realisable in the projected space of the poem, Riley examines issues of the heart and of economics, of the relationships between the bodies that make up the body politic, stimulating once again the idea of the democratic.

Whilst it’s important to remember that the poems in ‘Excavations’ are exercises in imaginative reconstitution rather than political activism, it’s possible to see them as objects which play an important democratic role. The notion that things as well as people can be political actors is central to Bruno Latour’s argument for a renewed, object-oriented democracy or ‘Dingpolitics’, as he calls it. He contends that:

we don’t assemble because we agree, look alike, feel good, [...] but because we are brought together by divisive matters of concern into some neutral, isolated place in order to come to some sort of provisional makeshift (dis)agreement. If the *Ding* designates both those who assemble because they are concerned as well as what causes their concerns or divisions, it should become the center of our attention: *Back to Things!*

(2005, 13)

After Heidegger, he draws two meanings from the word ‘ding’ or ‘thing’: it is both an assembly of subjects, such as a parliament or *althing*, and the ‘matters of concern’ around which such a parliament assembles, matters which themselves are gatherings or foldings of different elements. “Has the time not come to bring the *res* back to the *res publica*?” implores Latour (2005, 13), and *Excavations* appears to be such a joining, alternating between a parliament full of the din of arguing subjects, and one of Latour’s multiply gathered matters of concern. Where Latour parts ways with Heidegger is in refusing a distinction between the scientific or technological ‘object’ (*Gegenstand*)

and the poetic 'thing', writing in a paper in *Critical Inquiry* that "objects are simply a gathering that has failed – a fact that has not been assembled according to due process" (Latour 2004, 246). The choice of the words 'due process' here, with their implication of an individual's legislative protection from sovereign power, resonates with a central concern in Riley's work, that of "striving to maintain social justice when law is the king's new clothes" as Poem number 136 has it.

Such a striving is a continual process in *Excavations*, never completed and never achieved. Just as any gathering of physical objects vanishes, in the collector's eyes, into a proliferating series of gaps to be filled, so the assembly of *Excavations* cannot achieve what it has come together to attempt, to "gather the flesh, up into one ravelling cry", as Riley writes in Poem 61. The desire for a pure communication, such as music, or a speech which "defeats language" (189) is shot through the entire collection, and crystallises in one poem in the figure of angels. When these Angels rest, "the whole of intellection passes, as it is, into music, and regains the present tense". But this vision of restoration, where "the Angels make constant love/strife, the children dance on the edge of viability and the rich sharp berries are set on a town table for the recognition of working people", is suddenly shattered in the poem following this one, as "a soldier stands at an old woman's door, pointing a gun at her." The music distorts with political reality, the collection remains incomplete, and the cry takes on the quality of a lament.

And yet, as the anthropologist Andrew Moutu writes in *Thinking Through Things*, a sense of loss can be "integral to the constitution of collections, since this kind of loss seems to imbue collections with a temporal life and efficacy" (Moutu 2007, 109). Just as Moutu argues that a collection "contrives a sense of continuity that is predicated upon a condition of loss" (109), so Riley's poetry keeps open, for the duration of its being read, spaces of love and desire, in the face of what one poem calls "a rush to death, where those bitter spaces fold" (Riley 2004, 74). Moutu also claims that collections may be apprehended as a way of being (Moutu 2007, 108). If he is right, then the multiple chiasmas in Riley's poems, where dissenting voices or opposing trajectories of music and matter meet and cross, actually create anew, rather than simply memorialise. They are, as Riley writes in Poem 145, as much "sweet lessons on how to live" (Riley 2004, 163) as they are failed attempts to answer the impossible demands of the dead.

Ultimately, Riley's concern in *Excavations* is an ethical one. It addresses the impossible debt we owe by virtue of being inheritors, by coming after. And whilst it may not offer a solution to this, by juxtaposing its material in unexpected ways, by folding and rending distant points, Riley's collection creates new links of meaning between things, multiplying the possibilities of representation and, in a gesture of care, invites us to tend to these people who are at vanishing point; to "make them welcome, say to them: enter our reach, tell us all, tell us if" (156).

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