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Source Codes, and other Poetic Forces
Catherine Vidler's *Furious Triangle* (2011)

All poems end   as the philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes   eventually, or at least they have ends, to which the various forms, schemes and linguistic details of the poem become means.[i] Sydney-based poet Catherine Vidler, in her 2011 debut *Furious Triangle,* (Puncher and Wattmann), might be said to be making a poetry which both thinks-through, resists, and tests these conditions. In serious and playful dialogue with the ends (and odds) of the poem, Vidler makes her readers confront some of the most urgent and unsettling truths about poetry: that is, we are asked to ask some of the most radical questions about the very limits and possibilities of what we call a "poem," both in its form and in its function, its laws and its procedures.

One of my immediate favourites was "Diminishing Poem," a poem which threatens, as many of Vidler's poems do, to disappear on you. It does, as all poems do, end. As the lines in their dogged repetition begin to sink into a kind of a-fugal knot, readers may want to retrieve the poem from the void of

its own vanishing. But you can't. What survives of the poem is not so much the "stuff" of it, it's "content," to put it more crudely, but the *notion* of its form, existing as it were in a state of protracted and final disappearance. The end of the poem reads thus:

> smaller or tapering
> part to the upper part
> something smaller
>
> *
>
> smaller or tapering
> part to the upper part
>
> *
>
> part to the upper part

So it ends. "Diminishing Poem" loses its objective existence as it encounters time. One could say a poem is always towards its end. Though it may be possible to imagine a poem without an end, set off by its poet into infinity (and given the mathematical musings of this work this difficult thought did occur to me), being confronted with such a poem would be a wholly different question. It becomes a highly unlikely proposition. In any case, it may be safe to say that Vidler has written a poem that operates around the void of its own (dis)appearance.

"Five poems I didn't write" might be read as a continuation of the previous rumination. Vidler draws on the powers of the negative, and maybe even the powers of negative thinking, to generate her poems. Formal constraint can generate enormous repositories of energy (in musical terms think, for instance, of the fugue). Here her primary meditation was the following one: there are always poems which poets will either discard or,

in fact, never write. These are as numerous and perhaps as important as the ones that *are* written, for many of the poems that are finished are likely to have drawn upon the ashes and vestiges of these never-existing poems. The "poems" comprise of these vestiges:

5.   This is the poem I didn't write about photo booths. A series of likenesses
      is located beside the phones. Will only say "photo". Your complete
      privacy is cut short by the curtains.

I was reminded here of the obvious influences of Fluxus and conceptual art, and also of the rhetorical trope of ekphrasis. Ekphrasis makes linguistic *jouissance* in the object's absence (usually art, sculpture, often even music). In this case, the *poem itself* is absent; the absent poem being the poem's lost "part-object" (so to speak). In a tricky paradox, the poem functions in the poem's absence. Language displaces language. Representation hides behind the (notional) object of representation. Can we still call these non-poems *poems*, though? Absolutely. Or, why not? A curious stanza from the "Villanelle" goes:

> Synthetic music opens like a tent
> of longings with no permanent address
> (the towering ghost-gum is its own event)

An astounding passage, especially since desire as it is figured here (the "tent of longings") occupies a peculiar functional role as that of a shifting number, with "no permanent address." What are we to make of the phrase "Synthetic music": could it be at the break of musical authenticity that there lies the secret of desire, of beings who desire? And the singularity of the event, the "towering ghost-gum" in its permanency, is in its line bracketed as if it were an addition to what has gone

before. Time seems to rush around the evental ghost-gum, whereas the tent of longings seems to move *with* time and its "synthetic music." Two kinds of subjects appear. Or one, composed of both. Lines like these struck me all along, whose suggestions were not merely suggestions, but gestures towards a direction of thought. Rather than being offered any old set of possible readings, readers are forced to think within the singularity of the poem's thought. This is no doubt due to the clarity of Vidler's tone, but also the clarity and force of her poetic thinking. Thinking that induces in the reader a kind of reduction to the pure function of being a reader.

"Source code poems" make use of a vast and largely unexplored syntactic territory: computer programming language. Her use of computer program syntax is mischievous with its notional objects. This is what happens to a poem when it gets put in a function:

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274: public void addPoem() {

        [ . . . ]

61: else
    echo \ <h3\>Sorry, the poem doesn\'t exist yet\!\</h3\>
    fi
```

It's hard not to notice the *intent* of the input-lines:

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13: This is a fake poem<br/>This is a fake poem<br/>This is a
fake poem<br/>This is a fake poem<br/>

54: /*When anything at all happens, make a new poem    */ public
void actionPerformed(ActionEvent ev) {
```

We could identify "procedure" here as both a means to contain and a means to generate. It also raises questions of sincerity and authenticity. Was there ever a poem that wasn't made up? What is most arresting about the idea of these poems is the very threat they pose to poetry itself. How, for instance, can we gauge today the proximity of poetry and science, poem and matheme? The Source Code function plays something like the role of the Jakobsonian Shifter for poetry in its indexicality. Or, as Alain Badiou has suggested, "Poetry makes truth out of the multiple, conceived as a presence that has come to the limits of language."[ii] Vidler's procedures, generic in this way, operate at these limits.

Moreover, it is at these limits that contemporary technology becomes the medium of poetic thought. Committed procedural poetry will eventually only be avoiding its encounter with the realities of digital, virtual, and web-based domains of production and existence. Such conditions remain a most urgent question for those concerned with poetry's life and its living in language. Poetry simply cannot fail to take place under these conditions. But the expectation for poetry remains. Technology does not so much give birth to procedural poetry as use technology as its means (and inherited laws) of production.

How are we then to think the title? One possible signifiance of "Furious Triangle" is furious form. Sheer fury, energy generated from a three-sided figure. Perhaps there are hints of Pascal's triangle, or cross-multiplication and the rule of three. It may also invoke Oedipal structures. But even if such geometries are evoked, her work is far from being simply an abstract formalism. More profoundly, it takes energy and freedom from the *generative* capacity of form. In "10 two-word

poems" Vidler takes two words and brackets emerging words in between:

bri(sk y)awning

enli(ven n)exus

ventu(re ad)venture

id(le af)lutter

lea(f *in*d)ex

Is this experiment not a model for signification itself? Meaning appears between two signifiers, the emergent signifier a product of the collision of the two. The inventiveness of these poems is profound. Readers are treated to language as a process of discovery. The poem "Untitled" ends:

Google is lifting the net
on a storm of question-marks,
and everything new
is old again.

Words colonize the clouds.
The sky grows dark with wings.

Cyberspace is indistinguishable from "real" space. Google's silent but violent monopoly on space means "Everything new/is old again." Technology is as old as any natural phenomenon, but both end up powerless under the colonizing force of language. The last poem in the collection is titled "Collaborations with the Google Poetry Robot" and includes a poem titled "George Herbert," indicating perhaps a strong indebtedness to early-modern poetry behind the "post-modern" commitment to procedural form.

In sum, Vidler's work is Protean, adventurous and forceful in its thought and in its practice. Experimentalism isn't supposed to be easy, but with such technique she makes it seem so. And it's dangerously entertaining. If there is a name or a history for what Vidler is making and doing, it may be one rooted in the traditions of the experimental proceduralists (like Jackson Mac Low or even John Cage). But Vidler makes use of technologies and their affects that remake procedure for our situation. Her poems put on display the things that are most intriguing about poetry as art. Instead of offering us another regular book of poems, Vidler questions the very conceptual parameters of poetry itself by pushing poetic language to its absolute limits.

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[i] See Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics,* translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[ii] Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics,* translated by Alberto Toscano (Stanford Stanford University Press, 2005). 22.