

Kathleen Fraser, *Discrete Categories Forced into Coupling*: (Berkeley, CA: Apogee Press 2004)

What is it that happens when discrete categories are forced into coupling? This is a question that poet Kathleen Fraser poses both in the title and perhaps more quietly within the contents of her book *Discrete Categories Forced into Coupling*; though to the disappointment of the more literal reader, the answer lingers in a place at once there and not exactly there. And this kind of ambiguity and simultaneity of knowing and not knowing is perhaps a distinctive trait Fraser has carried with her throughout her career, this book not being an exception to the rule. Though, it is important perhaps not to mistake her innovations of form and diction for an absence of statement in her work; for often statement is to be found somewhere in between the vocabulary and its arrangement on the page. For Fraser, both in this text and within her body of work, the arrangement is crucial often communicating a message of its own to the perceptive reader, or at least one who leans in the direction of appreciating mixed-genre, innovative writing.

It was raining heavily and snowing farther up the road and she left for the appointment, both ahead of and behind her expectation

She is clever in her presentation, as a given piece may be initially experienced as a traditional narrative of sorts, but it inevitably diverges from this and enters into Fraser's characteristic phrasings that leave one wondering rather than knowing. The playful relationship she has with the English language is demonstrated in each and every one of the six sections of the book# and it is indicative of a certain flexibility of thought and a willingness to challenge the way we are all trained to utilize words, training that often results in empty and unoriginal writing. This is not at all the case with Fraser.

*I could draw a line with my crayon but the other lines are swallowing it.*

Though a quote from an external source, this line taken from an especially interesting section, the sixth and final one of the book, "AD Notebooks", is a line that actually reveals quite a lot about the poet

herself and her orientation to the world and to the page. Of course, it is dangerous to extract one line suggesting that it sums up her intention in nine words, and perhaps especially so in Fraser's case as the notion of summing up is ironic in the context of a poet's work that certainly is not about summing up or defining anything in concrete terms or images.

Fraser's lines suggest a certain pathway of thought, not an absolute truth or event that has taken place and subsequently verified by a series of facts. Instead, her presentation can, at times, seem to be story-like, but once you find yourself mid-way through one of her poems, you are not necessarily able to locate your position; neither your own nor the poet's. This kind of effect is reminiscent of some of Calvino's works, as in *Invisible Cities* wherein there is a dialogue but yet a certain kind of blurring of what actually is being said, what is actually being seen, and who is it that is actually speaking or being spoken to.

Additionally, in a collection of writing that is wide-ranging in its genres, sometimes a certain level of lyricism is sacrificed for the sake of innovation#a certain tone or voicing is abandoned when engaging in structural experiments. Yet somehow Fraser holds her own carrying her unique diction through the book; regardless of the form in any given section, her voice is nevertheless clearly being exercised and heard. This is not always the case with other writers, and perhaps her skill as a poet and innovator of language is demonstrated most effectively in this ability to maintain a consistent tone in the variegated landscapes of different genres of writing.

And finally, to return to the title, Fraser makes good use of a phrase that may at first seem technical or even scientific, but at times takes on a more personal and intimate tone. She writes in the sixth part of the first section titled, "Champs (fields) & between":

Learning to come as close as possible for two people lodged in separate bodies  
to move away but without rancor re-enacting the pleasure of breaking down their  
separateness, as if there were a final psychological position to grasp .

In this passage the poet addresses the tension inherent in human relationships, suggesting that there is a certain pleasure that accompanies the breakdown of individuality, but ultimately poses the questions: where

is the boundary line? How do we go about discerning the nature of union versus fragmentation? It doesn't appear that these questions are meant to be answered, at least not by Fraser. Perhaps that is a task left for the reader to assume.

She is a poet for whom a mixed-genre text is particularly well-suited; her voice and dialogues seem to call for a variety of forms through which they can be both seen and heard. More often than not, the trying on of different genres of writing has little to do with an awareness of form and function, or the use of space to facilitate the reader's understanding of the text. This is clearly not the case with Fraser, as whatever the form she chooses, her command of its structure and the language therein is invariably and successfully demonstrated.